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'MY QUEEN.'

'MY QUEEN.'

By Mrs. G. W. GODFREY,

AUTHOR OF

"DOLLY, A PASTORAL," AND "AULD ROBIN GRAY."

LONDON:

RICHARD BENTLEY AND SON,

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PART I.

"But she must be courteous, she must be holy,
Pure in her spirit, that maiden I love;
Whether her birth be noble or lowly
I care no more than the spirit above.
And I'll give my heart to my lady's keeping,
And ever her strength on mine shall lean,
And the stars shall fall, and the angels be weeping,
E'er I cease to love her—my Queen! my Queen!"

"MY QUEEN."

Part I.

CHAPTER I.

"AFTER all," I say, reflectively, as I put up my feet on the marble fender, and sip my mulled claret with a comfortable sense of warmth and content, "there is no part of a ball, a country ball especially, so pleasant as the coming home."

Though we are in the middle of May, and at midday the sun gives us a foretaste of summer, the nights are still chilly enough to make the fires, which are burning nine months out of the twelve in this country house, a pleasant luxury—doubly so after a long drive in the cold hours that mark the coming of a new day.

Sylvia, with her long hair glimmering like gold ove-

a dressing-gown of a pale, uncertain blue—Sylvia, with a brush held lazily in her hand, and bare white feet thrust into little slippers, turns her eyes from the flickering fire-flames on me.

"You poor old Esther!" she says, in a tone of the deepest commiseration.

"Do not pity me," I answer, cheerfully. "I have outlived the presumable delights of balls, it is true—love and lovers, dancing and flirtation; but there is always some consolation in the lowest depths of affliction. I can enjoy my supper with a perfect indifference as to who may take me in, and after supper there is always bed to look forward to. 'Be the day weary, or never so long, it cometh at last to evensong.' A ball cannot last for ever, thank goodness!"

She smiles slowly to herself.

"Poor Esther!" she says again.

"Not so poor, after all," I answer, with spirit. "I admit that no man is likely to fall in love with me at first sight—he would be a strange sort of a man if he did" (smiling); "that I am not likely to be troubled by the impossibility of deciding between the rival claims of the partners quarrelling for my dances—(how they did glare at each other, by-the-bye, Sylvia!) but, on the other hand, my heart does not beat with fear, sink with envy, if there be a woman better looking, better dressed than myself in the room. I can go in with

the comfortable assurance that no one will notice me. There is something in having quietly accepted the fact of one's mediocrity."

Her eyes are still fixed on me meditatively.

"Do you know," she says, gently, "I cannot remember ever having felt either fear or envy? I do not know" (with a little smile—a little colour on the creamy whiteness of her cheeks) "that I ever saw a woman whom I *really* thought better-looking or better-dressed than myself; but that, of course" (with a laugh), "both the looks and the dress are matters of taste."

"It is something to suit one's own taste," say I, sarcastically, "even if one suits no one else's."

"But," she goes on, not noticing me, "I do not know that I should altogether mind a rival—some one to get the better of. I do know that I would rather my heart should beat with envy, fear, jealousy, and every other heart-breaking passion, than not beat at all! I would rather be altogether miserable than stagnate, and quietly accept the fact of my own stagnation."

"'Nothing to hope means nothing to fear,'" I answer, quietly. "At least if one has no great happiness, one can have no great fear of losing it."

"And I would rather have my share of each; would rather know what it is to be altogether perfectly happy one day, even if I must pay for it by utter misery the next. Anything is better than to sink to the dull'

of monotony. Esther" (fixing her great eyes on my face), "what shall I do when I am as old as you are, when I shall have no more lovers—no more excitement and amusement?"

"My dear," I answer, quietly, "there are other things in the world to take their place. Even those who have no lover, or hope of one, may care very dearly for some one or something."

"I know," she answers, stretching out her hand to lay it for a moment caressingly on me, "*you* care for *me*. But even you, who have spent the best part of your life in taking care of me one way or another, cannot be first in my life always. You are almost like my mother; but even if you were my mother, you could not be *first* to me always. That is why I said 'poor Esther!' I should not care to live unless I thought that I were altogether necessary to *some one's* happiness."

I know that what she has said is true. I know that I never have been, never can be "first" with her, and that in the time to come I may not even be a necessary part of her life at all . . . but is it her fault that it should be so? And should I grieve her by letting her see how sore my heart is when I think of it? . . .

"To whom do you flatter yourself you are altogether necessary?" I say, lightly; "or, rather, who is the *last one?*"

"Et tu, Esther?" she answers, laughing. "Are you growing spiteful?"

"Is it by any chance the young man with the good-looking boyish face and the fair curly hair, with whom you danced so many times this evening?" I continue, "Certainly you did your best to turn his head—you might have turned an older and wiser one with half as many dances—but even you with all your conceit can scarcely flatter yourself you are altogether necessary to his happiness *yet!*"

"Is it possible," she says, laughing, and clasping her hands behind her golden head, "that you do not know who that was?"

"Do you suppose I can put a name to each one of your lovers at a moment's notice? I may have seen him—I have a faint idea I *have* seen him some years ago; but you see there have been so many of them since, that his own particular name and history has gone out of my head."

"Do you not remember Jerry Carrington?—Jerry who frightened you out of your life by letting me slide on the ice and tumble in? He is Sir Gerald Carrington now—his uncle and his cousin are both dead, and he has come into the property. Is not that luck?—a penniless, prospectless subaltern in a West Indian regiment one day, Sir Gerald Carrington, with more money than he knows what to do with the next.

I should not wonder if *that* had turned the poor boy's head."

"Jerry Carrington!" I repeat, amazed. "How is it I did not know him? To be sure, I have not seen him for five years, and five years make a great deal of difference when one is so young. I suppose" (laughing) "he was too busy looking at you to remember me. Well, no doubt we shall see plenty of him now—he will be here every hour of the day. I expect it is he who will break the ice and tumble in this time!"

"You silly old woman," says Sylvia, refusing to smile. "Do you call that wit?"

Silence then. I am reviewing the situation and all its possible complications. Sylvia is thoughtfully brushing the long waves of her silky hair.

"Was it," I ask presently, going straight to the point that has been occupying my mind, "was it because Gerald Carrington amused you so well that you could find no dances, no time to spare for Max—poor Max, whom you had not seen for so many years?"

She puts down her brush, and the cloud of thought which I have seen and wondered at ever since we came back, settles deeper on her tell-tale face.

"Do you know, will you believe it?" she says, with *naive* astonishment—"Max only asked me to dance with him *once*, and then it was not a waltz."

"Perhaps his regiment follows the example of the

—th, who don't dance," I answer, astonished too, though I will not show it.

"On the contrary," she answers quickly, "a man who knew him in India told me that he was noted for his waltzing. He is good at all that sort of thing."

"At any rate he did not dance with any one else," I suggest, consolingly. "He leant against the doorway and looked at you and young Carrington, and when he had nothing better to do talked to me. Perhaps," I add, with some malice, "he was disgusted with your flirtation, and would not ask you to dance only to be refused."

She looks at me—hesitates, and a slow faint flush comes on her cheeks.

"Esther," she says, in a low voice, "I do not mind confessing to you, only you must promise, *swear*, never to betray me, that I kept four dances almost until the end of the evening, thinking he would ask for them. Is it not a humiliating confession to keep dances for a man who does not want them?"

"Perhaps he was not well," I suggest, again racking my brains for some consoling explanation, though when I have produced it I feel that it is a glaringly improbable one.

"It is so disappointing," she cries, not noticing my lame attempt. "You do not know how I have looked forward to seeing him again. My own cousin! A cousin is not much to most people. They have cousins by th

dozen, cousins by the score, but there are only two people in all the world with whom *I* can claim kindred —Aunt Eleanor and Max. Aunt Eleanor is not much good. I am not sure that she is not worse than no aunt at all; but Max—did you ever know such luck, Esther? Max must needs come home after being six years in India without giving anyone any notice, and spend two months of his leave at home while we are at Nice or some other tiresome place."

"You forget," I say, maladroitly, "that you did not think it a tiresome place *then*, you were so happy there that you forgot about Max and every one else until you got tired of Count——"

She silences me with a look. It is one of Sylvia's peculiarities that she will not forgive any one who resuscitates one of her dead and buried flirtations.

"And when we do meet at last," she goes on, scornfully ignoring my interruption, "it is in a ball-room. We shake hands like strangers—and beyond the first look of astonishment (because I have *grown*, I suppose), he does not even seem pleased with me."

It is impossible not to smile at her *naive* expression of surprise and disgust, but knowing how displeasing any signs of mirth will be to her present mood, I suppress mine as best I may.

"Esther," she says presently, looking at me very earnestly, "are you sure that I looked well to-night. Was

it" (hesitating a little, and blushing a little too), "was it one of my *good-looking* evenings?"

"What has become of the admirable conceit with which, a few minutes ago, you declared yourself to be the best-looking woman of your acquaintance?" I ask, laughing. "Cannot you summon a little of it to your aid?"

"Did I not tell you," she answers, laughing too, but a little vexedly, "that it is only a matter of taste. I may be some people's taste, but evidently I am not Max's."

"What does it matter what Max thinks?" I say, cheerfully. "After all, he is only a cousin. You cannot expect every one to fall in love with you at first sight. A good many of them do, I admit, but there must be some exceptions."

She gives me a look that ought to annihilate me; but for reasons of my own, I am able to bear it quite cheerfully.

I, who am behind the scenes, who am looking on at a game in which I dare not meddle, and who yet so strongly desire that these two should love each other, am by no means sorry that the first meeting between them as man and woman has begun as it has, with a little indifference, or semblance of indifference, on the one hand, a good deal of pique on the other.

Have I not long ago predicted that when Sylv
fall in love, it will be with some one who does n

her?—does not, at any rate, make himself so easy, so inglorious a conquest as most of those for whom she has had any passing fancy have done. I know that to a woman like Sylvia there could be no more piquant stimulant to love than an indifference to which she is so unaccustomed; and I cannot, in my heart, believe that if she were in truth in love, Max or any other man could long resist her. It could only be a question of time; and if time could bring these two together, then I could sing my "Nunc Dimittis" with a glad and thankful heart. My mission in life would be accomplished.

"Two months!" she says presently, more to herself than to me, after a fit of musing, during which I have yawned furtively, and stolen a good many longing glances at my cosy bed. "It is a long time to spend in the country, with only one old woman for company. I wonder what Max has done to amuse himself?"

"Fallen in love, most likely," I say, with a yawn, which gets the better of me. "Men always fall in love when they are in the country and have nothing else to do. It is not always with the prettiest: it is very seldom with the most desirable person; but it is nearly always with the *nearest*."

"Did you not yourself remark that Max did not dance with *any one?*" she asks, coldly and scornfully. "And was not every girl within twenty miles in the room to-night?"

"Perhaps it is some village beauty, then." (Nipping another yawn in the bud.)

She rises disdainfully, disdainfully draws the folds of her blue dressing-gown round a milk-white throat and neck.

"You are stupid and sleepy, Esther," she says, with a look that is as near crossness as she can arrive at. "If you were not both, you would not suggest that Max—Max, who holds his head so high, who has a right to hold his head so high—is he not the last of the oldest family in the country?—could fall in love with a village beauty."

She sweeps towards the door with that queenly grace so peculiar to her, even as a little child. It was this little dignified way that made her father, I fancy, first call her his "little queen," so that "Queenie" was her pet name—almost her only name for many, many years. It is only quite lately that, being abroad, and among strangers, I have learnt to cure myself of it.

"We can settle it to-morrow," I say amicably. "Remember, you have promised to spend the day at the Abbey, and no doubt in a whole day we shall find out more about him."

"I promised Aunt Eleanor," she says, with her hand on the door; "but now I have a good mind not to go."

I do not ask for any explanation of this speech. I only hold up my hands in affected dismay.

"What! let poor Tim squeeze himself into his tight livery (it must have grown tighter than ever since we have been abroad)—let Lady Eleanor kill the fatted calf—the last of her dear old fowls,—and then not go! You are very brave, my Queen; but not brave enough for that."

She laughs, gathers up the tail of her long gown, and shuts the door.

And I am alone—free to scramble as quickly as I please into the soft eider-down nest for which I have been longing so weariedly through the long hours that I have sat on a backless bench with the other wall-flowers—free to yawn as loudly, as openly, as I please, without fear of offending Sylvia. And yet, though I am free to do both of these things—perhaps *because* I am—I do neither. On the contrary, I go to the window, and drawing up the blind, look out on the fair still landscape, across which the dawn of a new day is stealing softly, like a smile on a sleeping face.

All these broad acres—the luxuriant gardens, the far-stretching sweeps of park-land, with the gleam of rippling water in the distance, are Sylvia's—only Sylvia's. Some people might think—not unnaturally—that her mother, who was the only daughter of the Lyndhursts, of Lyndhurst Abbey, the oldest, the proudest, but the poorest, family in the county, had not done altogether badly in marrying the rich Mr. Miller, whose wealth, though he was but a manufacturer, was a thing to marvel at. But

Lady Eleanor Lyndhurst is not one of these. She turned up her nose at the man and his trade-gotten wealth, and would scarce recognize her sister-in-law after her marriage. It is only because he is dead, and because she has ordained it wisest to bury his connection with the Lyndhurst family with the dead, that she owns—aye, even sometimes deigns to patronize—my Sylvia. (As if anyone could patronize my Queen!)

Leaning there on the window-sill, with the light of a new day in my tired eyes, I forget my sleepiness—I forget my yawns—I fall to thinking.

It is fifteen years since I, suddenly orphaned, suddenly brought from a position of independence to the necessity to earn my own living, came to this beautiful house, which has been my home ever since—which Sylvia says is to be my home until death calls me to another—as companion, governess, play-mate to this little petted only child, my Sylvia. It seems to me, looking back, that I could never have had any other home, any other interests, but those that are all centred around her—my charge from the dead—my darling.

It was only three years after that I was left to fill the mother's place (how poorly, how inadequately, only those who have a mother's love, and yet not a mother's heaven-born wisdom alone can tell), left vacant by a sudden and cruel death. It was only three years after that my mistress (I loved to call her so, though she was then my

kindest dearest friend) parting from her child for an absence of a few hours, turned to me with her bright sweet smile—the love-look still lingering in her eyes—and bade me take care of her darling, and bring her to meet her at the west lodge at six o'clock. She was driving herself—spirited showy ponies—but she never drove home; long before six they *carried* her home, maimed beyond hope of recovery.

Two days later, I knelt by her bed, choking back the blinding tears as best I might, and, looking into the tearless agony of her eyes, received her last message to her child—the message that I have carried in my heart ever since—that Max's return has brought so freshly to my memory to-night.

Through the utter stillness of the sleeping world, in which I seem to myself to be the only living waking creature, comes straight from the dead, as I stand here by the window, the echo of the faint sweet voice, saying—

"Esther, promise me you will never leave my darling. I have no one to trust but you. She has her good, kind father, but no woman who loves her well enough to stay with her always; to take, little by little, my place——"

She broke down there. *Her* place! What mother could bear to think her place would ever be filled?—and I knew that though she would not even *seem* to rail against God, she *could* not be willing to leave her darling.

Then she told me what I had only guessed: that her brother's poverty, and the thought that some day her old home might have to go to strangers, had lain heavily on her heart; and that, in spite of Lady Eleanor's coldness to her and her husband, she had cherished the hope that some day her little Sylvia might marry her cousin Max, and her money might save the Abbey.

"Do nothing to bring it about. Do not even let my Queenie know it was my wish, lest that should influence her," she said, in her faint solemn tones. "But if it should be ever settled—surely settled—then tell my darling from me that it was her mother's dearest wish, and that she is sure, quite sure, that wherever she may be God will let her know of her child's happiness, and she will be happier for it."

That is the message that I have carried in silence through all these years—waiting, always waiting, for the time to come when I may deliver it.

For in a little while—such a little while—mother and child were parted. God help them! . . . And many years after, only five years ago, Mr. Miller died too; and my Sylvia was left to me only.

Heaven knows how through all these years I, with every wile and stratagem of which I am mistress, have tried to keep her from the lovers who have beset us at every turn, attracted not only by her fortune (that I cannot believe), but by her sweet and taking ways; how, thinking

only of Max—always of Max, and the time when he should come home—I have tried to guard her even from those lovers who seemed desirable, longing always, waiting always for the day when I shall be able to tell her of her mother's wish, knowing that wish accomplished. And now, Max is here. To-night he and Sylvia have met for the first time as man and woman. And not only Max is here, but, to complicate matters, another, who has evidently added himself to the long list of Sylvia's lovers—young, handsome, rich, and desirable in every way, living at our very gates.

The situation is so exciting that I feel I have scarcely time to sleep, but on reflecting that it will not be possible to keep awake until this story of real life be played out, I drop the blind, and in spite of early-rising birds, clamouring vociferously to let their neighbours know they are awake, in spite of the bright light, and all the stir of life that marks the coming of a new day, I speedily lose Max, Sylvia, and all lovers past, present, and to come, in a sweet oblivion.

CHAPTER II.

WITH the morning Sylvia regains all her usual gay good-temper. I do not think it would be possible for her to be long out of humour with any one or any thing.

As we drive along through the fresh country lanes, her happy laughter seems to keep time to the music of her ponies' bells. It is one of those fair spring mornings that seem to bring with them a foretaste of heaven. Over our heads is a sky of deepest blue. Around and about us the young trees and the hedges are thick with tiny tender leaves, white and pink with a wealth of thorn-blossom, the meadows are yellow with daffodil and buttercup, and far and away the purple clouds melt into the blue of the sky.

The fresh morning air, so soft and yet so invigorating, blowing in our faces, seems to gladden us so, that we laugh as we go, scarcely knowing why.

Indeed, it seems as if it would be difficult not to be light-hearted on such a morning; and yet I know that if one's heart were heavy with loss, there could be no time in which it would be heavier than in the spring. To see life everywhere—every tiny blade of grass, every little sprig of moss, that had seemed to be dead, sending out fresh shoots from the vigorous life that God had left within it all the winter—only sleeping, not *dead*—and know that one, only one, must lie still, and quiet, and dead through this and all springs to come, never to be reinvigorated by the warm life-blood that seems so plentiful, so freely given everywhere—surely that must carry an agony of regret that must make every flower that blows, every tree that bursts into fresh leaf, a stab of pain.

The drive from the Cedars to Lyndhurst Abbey is only about five miles in all, and Sylvia's fleet-footed ponies, driven by Sylvia's impatient hands, soon cover the ground.

As we go along, it is easy to mark where the Cedars estate ends and Lyndhurst begins. We leave the trim park palings, the well-kept hedges, the model cottages with their cleanly, rosy-faced children behind us. We come to unkempt hedges, broken palings, cottages where the pigs run riot with the children, and overpower with their unsavoury smell the sweet perfume of the spring flowers.

Sylvia's laughs grow rarer, her face graver, and as we draw up before the huge rusty iron gates, whose weight is almost too much for our trim little groom, and look at the deserted lodge, almost a ruin, the long, dark, weed-grown avenue, she sighs audibly.

"Poor Max!" she says, very thoughtfully. "I wonder how it struck *him* when he came home!"

And I know that after our long absence these signs of ruin and poverty have struck her more painfully than usual.

Before we reach the house, we pull up, and Charles takes a hamper that has been squeezed in between Sylvia and me, to the discomfort of our legs, and struggles with it round through the stables to the back door. We always go through this programme when we visit the Abbey. Whether Lady Eleanor swallows her dignity and Sylvia's hot-house fruits and tender ducklings when our backs are turned, we do not know. We only know it would require braver hearts than ours to go boldly up to the front door with a gift in our hands. Once, long ago, soon after her father's death, Sylvia, relying on the favour her aunt had shown her, drove out with some fruit and flowers, but she *came back with them*, and with a pair of burning cheeks into the bargain; and I know it was a long time before she went to the Abbey again. But I know, too, that it is so terrible to her to look on the wasteful abundance in her own luxurious home, and

know that five miles away her own aunt is living in proud and silent want of some of the necessaries and of all the luxuries of life; that she has long ago pocketed the affront shown to her and her gifts, and now conveys them surreptitiously instead of openly, content to know that they must benefit some one of the not-too-well-fed household.

So Charles comes back lighter than he went, and with innocent faces and guilty consciences we drive up to the front entrance.

The massive old doors, grim with bolts and clamps of iron, are wide open, and, bareheaded in the kindly spring sunshine, Max is standing on the steps to greet us.

He is not a handsome man—not with a spick-and-span *drawing-room* handsomeness. He does not look down the bridge of his nose with a supercilious contempt for his fellow-creatures—and that is the *sine qua non* of a lady's handsome man, is it not? But it seems to me, looking up at him as he stands with the searching light finding out all the defects and all the pleasantness of his bronzed face, that one need seek far for a goodlier man.

The heritage of care, debt, and anxiety into which he came at his birth has "marred his face, and marked it ere his time," put some silver threads among the silky short brown beard, a few lines on the broad and

noble forehead; and there is sometimes, I know, a little devil of pride, inherited from his mother, ready to flash into his steel-grey eyes and to curve the corners of his lips, but it is not there now. There is nothing but kindliness and friendliness, and—yes!—a great, unmistakeable admiration as he holds out his hand and helps Sylvia out of her carriage.

Not his taste!—Is not she? I look from him to her, and I do not find it difficult to understand the look which a moment ago lay so legibly in his eyes.

The fresh morning air has painted her soft white cheeks with the deepest carmine. Excitement, coquetry, or the desire to please where she is not so certain of pleasing as she usually is, have given her great dark eyes and her tell-tale mouth, usually bright with gay and careless laughter, a softer and more appealing look than they ordinarily wear. Truly it would be difficult to find a man whose taste Sylvia would not suit at this moment.

"It is good of you to come," says Max, leading the way through the vast old hall, dark with painted windows, grim with suits of armour, which, standing in dim recesses, look horridly like the ghosts of Max's ancestors, who once inhabited them. "My mother must be fearfully dull. She seems to have quarrelled with all our neighbours. Nobody comes here from 'early morn to dewy eve,' but the butcher or the grocer,

and they come very seldom, except" (with a bitter smile) "when they want their money."

Has he not fathomed the heights and the depths of his mother's pride? Does he not guess, as we do, that she has quarrelled with all the people in the county, rather than receive them with diminished and fallen dignity?

He leads the way to a room, big enough to cut up into half a dozen modern drawing-rooms. The tapestry, panels, painted ceiling, and carved oak are all priceless things in their way, but there is not a piece of furniture in the room, from the spindle-legged piano that stands in the corner to the high-backed chairs, ranged in a formal row against the wall, that one feels one would dare to touch for fear it should fall to pieces. It reminds one of those old show-rooms in a house made sacred by a visit from the Great Elizabeth, where little printed placards, "You are requested not to sit on the chairs," are stuck about in conspicuous places.

Lady Eleanor, sitting on one of these straight-backed chairs before a vast fire-place, and a very small fire, rises to receive us with a stately courtesy that is a relic of the good old times she believes in so devoutly—no hearty spontaneous warmth, only a formal and rigid politeness that draws the line very distinctly between a niece and a niece's companion. They did not knock down the barriers of class in those days.

If it be possible to mingle some admiration with a vast amount of pity, then I admire this old lady. There is something grand in the way she ignores her shabby surroundings; serves her meagre fare off her rich silver dishes, orders about her boy of all-work, with the tone and the dignity with which long ago she probably ordered her father's powdered flunkies. But it is easy to admire at a comfortable distance. *I* do not suffer from her pride; but I think that if I were her son, or her servant, I would rather she would pocket some of it, sell her silver dishes, and give me better fare off commonest china.

When we have taken off our hats, when we have talked a little, I to Max, Sylvia to her aunt, Tim throws open the door, and in a voice which I recognize as a very worthy imitation of Sylvia's pompous old butler's, announces luncheon.

Tim has the broadest nose, the widest mouth, and biggest, stuck-out ears that ever grew on the head of mortal boy; but he is a treasure in his way. He does a little of everything, and does not do that little so very badly. Like all treasures he has his drawback. He grows. I look with painful curiosity to see how much he has grown while we have been away, and I see that there is a bigger, much bigger piece of bare red wrist between his hand and the sleeve of his jacket, and a terrible expanse of white stocking beneath his trousers.

I notice, too, that he dodges about in a crab-like sort of way, always keeping his face towards us. Even when he goes to the sideboard, between which and the table there is a good space, he walks backwards as if he were in the presence of royalty. I am wondering whether it is Lady Eleanor's latest whim, a by-gone fashion revived, when somebody drops a spoon, Tim is forced to stoop and pick it up, and his secret is out. The seam down the back of his jacket, strained beyond the endurance of mortal seams, has *burst*, and a good three inches of shirt is bulging through. It is an anxious question whether before lunch is over, the jacket may not split into two halves—poor Tim!

"Will you have some chicken or some beef, Miss Grey? This is for the third time of asking," says Max in a loud voice, recalling my wandering thoughts.

I start guiltily, and swallow a laugh that is rising in my throat. There is a smile, not a happy one, on his lips, which tells me he has found me out. Curiosity is my besetting sin; this time it has led me into making one of the people I like best in the world more ashamedly uncomfortable than he was before.

"Let me advise you to choose chicken," he says, glancing from the bare bone before him, to the fowl whose scraggy legs are disporting themselves in a pool of greasy gravy, around which are some brown things that

look like mushrooms. "There is not much beef, and what there is is fat."

"Chicken, please," I say nervously, anxious to make amends for my rudeness. "I am so fond of mushrooms."

"They are not mushrooms; but that is a detail," he answers (laughing *really* this time). "*They* are what the cooks call 'briled bacon,'—*devilled* bacon, I should say from its blackness."

Thank heaven there is an immense desert of table between Max and Lady Eleanor, and she is not quick of hearing. In the midst of the desert is a silver palm-tree, hiding Sylvia from me, but through one of the branches I catch a warning look and a glimpse of a burning cheek.

Partly from nervousness, partly from a genuine desire to make Max forget his uncomfortable surroundings, and partly (a very big partly) from a certainty that if I am silent I shall be compelled to look at Tim, and watch the progress of his rent, I laugh and talk so persistently through the rest of lunch, that Lady Eleanor rewards me with a cold and repelling look which says as plainly as a look can, that in her time companions knew their place, and waited to speak until they were spoken to.

But if I have succeeded in making Max forget for a moment Tim, beef, chicken, and the general poverty

and nakedness of the land, I can afford to be comfortably indifferent to her opinion.

* * * * * *

It is four o'clock.

Partly from politeness, partly in furtherance of certain designs of my own, perhaps for neither one reason nor the other, but only because I could not help myself, I have been sitting for an hour-and-a-half on this straight-backed chair, *tête-à-tête* with Lady Eleanor, while Max and Sylvia are strolling together in the pleasant sunshine.

Lady Eleanor has confided to me, or rather, to put it more correctly, she has given me to understand that she considers Sylvia "much improved" by her stay abroad, that considering all things—that Mr. Miller has atoned for the presumption of his existence by going out of a world in which he never had any proper place, that the purity of her birth on one side, may atone for its blackness on the other, that (this with a bitter sneer) considering how people in these days think only of money, very little of how it was gotten (one would think Mr. Miller had *stolen* his) Sylvia might hope in time to marry well.

"Marry well" in her sense does not mean the same as in yours or mine. It means that by "strict attention to business," Sylvia, with her beautiful face, her many gifts and her money, may hope to win or buy the favour of

some worn-out, beggared earl, with a pedigree as long as my arm, and nothing to give her but an aristocratic name in exchange for a plebeian one.

She even dimly hints that if in the time to come Max should find that he could do no better, she might not altogether oppose a marriage between the cousins—unparalleled condescension! Sylvia herself, her beauty and her grace, count for nothing. She only weighs over and over again the advantages and disadvantages of her birth, until nothing but a sense of the utter impolicy of the proceeding prevents me from geting up and marching out of the room.

Thank heaven! the warmth of the afternoon, the monotony of her own arguments, interrupted by the barest monosyllables from me, send her off at last into a blessed sleep. I hardly dare breathe for fear I should wake her. I have been sitting in this straight-backed chair an hour-and-a-half by the clock—double, treble that time by my feelings, wondering wearily what our grandmothers' backs *could* have been made of, longing devoutly for one of Sylvia's soft lounges, and I can hardly believe in my freedom.

I watch the stately old head, so silver-white that it looks as if it were powdered (Lady Eleanor disdains the hair-dye and the make-ups that are the failures of old ladies in these latter days), nodding slowly and regularly, and then when I am quite sure she is soundly off, I rise

from my stool of repentance as stealthily as my stiff limbs will allow me, and creep warily across the long room to the farther end, where an open window is letting in the soft fresh air.

I gently open both the casements wide as they will go, and curling myself upon the low window-seat, drop my knitting lazily into my lap and stretching out my neck bask in the sunshine.

It is so warm, so still in this guest-less, servant-less old abbey. Lady Eleanor out yonder might be the sleeping beauty if she were about fifty years younger and fifty times prettier, and this an enchanted palace. The drowsy hum of insects, the distant lowing of cattle going home to be milked, are all the sounds I hear, for unlike the man in the poem my heart does not beat audibly. I should fall to think of my latter end if it did.

I think I am getting drowsy too, when there comes another sound—high-heels on the stone terrace—then the swish of a long gown sweeping up the loose stones, and a minute after a merry radiant face peeps in at my window.

"Going to sleep, Esther?" says Sylvia's clear fresh voice. "What have you done with Aunt Eleanor?"

"Hush!" (glancing nervously over my shoulder). "Pray do not speak so loud; you will wake her."

"How considerate you are" (laughing). "Is she so tired?"

"I do not know" (yawning and laughing too). "*I* am. By-the-bye, what have *you* done with Max?"

"I have sent him to tell Charles to have the ponies ready in half-an-hour. He will be back directly. Won't you come out?"

"N—o" (a little dubiously). "I think not. It is pleasanter here."

I am not sticking very closely to the truth, and Sylvia knows that I am not. When two people have lived for a long time together, they are perfectly well up in each other's little fibs. I have been longing to get out of this dreary room ever since I got into it, but, on the principle that "two are company and three are none," I resist the longing.

"There is Max!" she says, starting up, and altogether forgetting to persuade me to come. She goes to join him. I watch them as they pace up and down the terrace—a good-looking, well-matched pair. His few inches of extra height only enable him to look comfortably at her, without the necessity of craning his neck, as a very tall man must to catch sight of a very little woman.

Presently they stop by the stone balustrade of the terrace, just opposite my window. There is a splendid view from there, for the Abbey stands high, and Sylvia leans her arms on the stonework, looking with dreamy eyes across the sunlit world.

"Do not lean too heavily on those stones," says Max, watching her. "I will not answer for their bearing even your weight."

She draws back.

"Max," she says, presently, turning her sweet, thoughtful eyes on him, and hesitating a little, "what a shame it is that this beautiful old place should go to rack and ruin. If it tumbles to pieces for want of a little wretched money, all the king's horses and all the king's men could not build it up again. No modern imitation could be a patch upon it. It almost breaks my heart to see it."

"The shame is not mine," he answers, flushing a little (do I not know how sore a subject it is to him?); "or I might break *my* heart over it. But, after all, hearts are more than houses."

"Do you not *care?*" she cries, reproachfully.

"Yes; I care," he answers very quietly, with one glance up at the old rugged pile of buildings that belong to him, and have belonged to his ancestors for well-nigh three hundred years. "Do you think a man could *help* caring?"

"And is there nothing you can do?" she asks, more gently.

"Do you know," he answers hotly, looking at her as if he were half-surprised at her for venturing on such ground, more than half-surprised at himself for answer-

ing her; "that it was all that my father could do before me, all and more than I can do after him, to pay off the mortgages as each one becomes due? For our inheritance, he before me, I after him, have paid with the misery, the sacrifice, of our whole lives."

She does not answer—unless sweet, pitiful eyes can answer.

"I, as a mere lad," he goes on, "instead of being brought up as the heir of an English house, was put into the army, because the pittance with which Her Majesty rewards her servants was matter of consideration. Since my father died that pittance, my mother's money, and all we can scrape together by hook or by crook will barely keep mortgagees and creditors at bay, and supply the luxurious food on which, as you see, we fare so sumptuously every day."

There is a bitter sneer on his lips, a deeper flush on his face, that ought to warn Sylvia; but she will not be warned.

For a moment she knits her brows together in deepest thought, then looks up suddenly, as if a bright idea had struck her.

"Why could not you sell something—some part of the grounds, they are so immense—to get money and save the rest?" she asks eagerly.

"Because to sell one stick, one rood, one stone, one picture, or piece of family plate, would be to break my

mother's heart, and give her her death-blow," he answers, curtly. "No, we must keep the dogs at bay until she be beyond knowing of it, and then——"

"And then?" she asks, breathlessly.

"And then *sell*."

"Sell the Abbey! Sell my mother's home, that, next to myself, she loved better than anything else in the world!" (breathlessly, incredulously). "You *cannot* mean it, Max—not that?"

"Yes; sell the Abbey," he answers, folding his arms and leaning against the very stone-work he a minute ago condemned, "sell it to some one who can afford to keep it; sell my birthright of debt and anxiety, and go into the world a free man."

Her eyes are fixed on him with a mixture of pity, dismay, and incredulity. All her life long she has known that the Lyndhursts were in debt and difficulty, but such a sacrilegious possibility as this has never dimly crossed the region of her thoughts. Lyndhurst Abbey in the hands of strangers would be to her like the end of the world.

Something in her look breaks through his mask of bitter and cynical quietude.

"God knows, there is nothing I would not do to save the old place, if I could," he says with feeling. "I think I would almost be willing to cut my throat, if that would do any good; but that" (laughing) "would be a

poor way out of it, as I am the last of the name, and, with the exception of you, the last of the family."

There is silence for a moment, and then Sylvia, colouring vividly, comes forward a step or two, eagerly, hesitatingly, and lays a small white hand on his grey sleeve.

"Oh, Max!—will you!—won't you——"

But her hand falls to her side, the words on her lips, whatever they are—generous words, I know—die there, unspoken.

And, looking at Max, I know why.

The look which I know, and have seen before, which she most likely cannot remember ever to have seen before, is on his face now. There is a bitter demon of pride flashing from his eyes, curling his lips, transforming his whole face so that he looks like his mother—a pride that is his inheritance—cruel, stubborn, irresistible, kept in abeyance by his gentler and nobler disposition, but still there. There for a moment, and then gone. I, who have known him from a boy, know so well the quick change of mood which, in spite of all faults, made him always so likeable, which makes him now stretch out his hand to Sylvia looking so sorry for the hurt and chidden expression on her beautiful face.

"Do not let us talk of it any more, dear," he says, gently. "It is a sore subject to me, and I cannot trust myself to speak of it."

She stands silent, holding his hand. Then, emboldened by his gentleness, she says timorously—

"Is there *no* way you could get money, Max?"

He looks steadily for a moment into the eyes upraised to his, and as he looks, a sudden vivid flush—born who knows how?—comes into the girl's face.

"No *honourable* way," he answers quietly, and drops her hand.

* * * * * *

Half an hour later we are in the carriage, and Max is arranging the rugs over our feet.

"Remember, you have promised," says Sylvia, gaily, as she whips up her horses. "Tuesday week."

And Max nods, lifts his hat, and we are off.

"What has he promised?" I ask, as we go up the avenue at our usual reckless speed.

"That he will come and stay a week or so while those other people are with us. It will be so much nicer to have a man who in some sort belongs to us. It is so awkward to have no one to do the honours when one leaves the table—to see that the men have claret and cigars, and all that."

"I dare say they take care of themselves, and do not stand on too much ceremony when our backs are turned."

"I never have a dinner party," she goes on, laughing, "but I wish you could turn yourself into a man for the occasion."

"The only way out of that difficulty, and to provide a man for that and every other occasion, is—to marry."

"*You* say that?" she cries, turning on me—"you, who have done your best to set me against every man, good, bad, or indifferent, until I have almost got to believe they are *all* fortune-hunters?"

"There are exceptions to every rule," I say tritely, being unable to deny the accusation. Is it not true?

"It is so bad for Max to be in that big house all alone," she goes on presently (evidently Lady Eleanor counts as no one). "And yet, do you know, it was all I could do, though I tried my best—and you know (smiling) "my best is not very bad—to get him to come. One would think there was some wonderful attraction in solitude, bare bones, and an empty house."

"You forget the village beauty," I say, remembering my suggestion of the night before.

But it is the last time I make that little joke. Evidently it does not find favour in Sylvia's eyes.

* * * * * *

That evening, Sylvia, standing by the open window, looking out into the twilight, says suddenly—

"Esther, how much money do you suppose it would take to pay off all the mortgages and debts on Lyndhurst Abbey?"

"I could not give a guess," I answer, startled by the

suddenness of the question. "I have no idea of its value."

"Would—would all my money do it?" turning round and looking me very earnestly in the face.

"My dear, half your money would do it," I answer. "The value of a house like Lyndhurst is the value of association. It would not fetch much in its present state of dilapidation as a modern residence, and you are rich, very rich."

It is true. The despised Mr. Miller was the richest man—his daughter is the richest woman—for a great many miles round.

She is silent then again—looking out into the night, pursuing her own thoughts.

"I think," she says at last, laughing a little, and turning her face round for an instant, "I must manage to die and leave all my money to Max—I do not see any other way out of it."

And I, like a wise woman, say nothing, though I hope that I do see another way out of it.

CHAPTER III.

We are in the very heart of June—"the leafy month of June"—in whose honour poets have poetized, writers have written so much that nothing remains to be said, except that it *is* June, the June of our poets and our imaginations, with its blue skies and temperate winds, its many flowers, and long evenings—not the June of our usual experience, with bitter east winds, freezing nights, and nipped blossoms.

"Seek roses in December—ice in June," is a sarcasm that carries less weight with it in these latter days, when snow and Derby day are quite possible combinations, than it evidently did in Byron's time. But for once we have a *real* June. All day long we may bask, if so we please, under the delicious warmth of sunny skies, tempered by the soft wind of the west. All evening long we may sit, if we be not very old or very rheumatic with

open windows, or uncovered head beneath the sweet and starlit skies. I think I must be very old indeed, when I forget to thank God for the soft splendour of a June evening.

For three weeks have Sylvia's guests been with us, lingering day after day, loth to leave such good quarters, such an easy, non-interfering hostess.

I do not know that we have been a very well-assorted party. Sylvia is rather apt to pick up her guests from the highways and hedges of life, to ask just those whom she comes across, those who seem to want to be asked, rather than those rich, clever, or beautiful ones whom all the world delights to honour. I am bound to say that they often reward her good nature very ill. They quarrel with her, get jealous of her, or, if they be poor, borrow money of her; while she, on her part, is apt to get very tired of them after a day or two of their company, and to leave the amusing of them to me.

But the knowledge that on the day after the morrow we shall all go our several ways—north, south, east, and west, has made us for the moment, forget our little differences—(did ever ten people live together for three weeks in a country house *without* their little differences, their likes and dislikes, jealousies, politely-veiled squabbles, their cliques of hair-brushing, and smoking-room scandal-mongery?) and the amiability for which most people are conspicuous after a good dinner, plenty of dry

champagne, and unimpeachable claret, has made us mild as lambs.

A young lady, Olympia Gwyn by name, having been "bidden to discourse," is "enchanting our ears" with a song, and is "dancing on the sands" with many a twirl and flourish. Being a soft, dove-like looking creature, from whom one would expect low, cooing, contralto notes, she has, naturally, by the rule of contraries, a high and shrill soprano voice.

Out yonder, on a low ottoman, an old General, who has lately married a young wife and lost all his money in a great bank failure (fit object for Sylvia's compassion) is making violent love—for which the champagne and the claret are to blame—to a pretty widow, whom Sylvia has asked here with the generous intention of finding her a second husband. The husband who is to be, is at the present moment missing.

Max on a low chair—all Sylvia's chairs are low and seductive—has drawn up close to another low chair, on which is Mrs. Carnegie, the General's innocent-eyed little wife, and is very kindly trying to make her forget her husband's too obvious flirtation; and a handsome sailor-boy, the life of our party, is turning over Olympia's music.

Sylvia is nowhere; and I, enjoying my rare freedom, am sitting *perdu* behind a lace curtain and by an open French window, opening on to the terrace.

Suddenly, close by my side, startling me so that I nearly jump off my chair, there appears a head, and after the head and belonging to it, a man's body—Gerald Carrington's body—clad in grey morning clothes, with a dog tucked under his arm.

"You!" I say, startled. "How you frightened me!"

"Haven't they gone yet?" (in a whisper, and nodding his head in the direction of our guests). "I thought they were all going to-day, and that you and Sylvia would be alone, probably out on the terrace, and would let me say good-night to you though I am not in regulation clothes."

"Sylvia took it into her head to have a picnic to-morrow, to see the monastery ruins and persuaded them all to stay," I say, shortly; "and they were good enough to consent."

He laughs, but it is a subdued laugh—evidently he does not want his presence to be discovered.

"What have you done with Mr. Grayling? How is it you are alone?" he asks.

Mr. Grayling is the good *parti* whom Sylvia destines for the widow; but being of a meek and nervous disposition, and horribly afraid that Sylvia will *make* him marry her whether he will or no he usually sticks to me closer, a great deal closer than a brother, considering me the least aggressive and designing of the party, and

his tendency to shelter under my protecting wing has come to be a joke among us.

"Mr. Grayling has gone out sketching," I answer, smiling to myself as I think of him. "He went out the first thing this morning, and has not yet returned. We think he must have lost himself. Sylvia is going to offer a reward to anyone who will return him in good condition."

"Perhaps he has preferred death to matrimony, and drowned himself in the lake," he answers, laughing. "By-the-bye, did not you wonder why *I* did not turn up to dinner?"

I might have wondered, seeing that every day or nearly every day for the last three weeks he has honoured us by his presence But I have not yet forgiven him for the start he gave me, and I would a great deal rather he were not so often here; so I answer crossly,

"To tell the truth I did not think about you."

"Candid, if not polite." He answers, smiling grimly, "Well, to give you the information for which you will not ask, I rode to Draytown (ten miles distant), my horse fell lame, had to get dinner at an inn, eggs and bacon and that sort of thing, and *walk* home. Comfortable, wasn't it?"

He is talking to me, but he is not looking at me. Under shelter of the lace curtain, he, standing out on the terrace can, himself unseen, see well into the lamp-lit

interior. Hither and thither, into every little nook and corner his eager eyes go roaming.

"She is not there," I say drily.

Even in the darkness (is it not a shame to call this summer night darkness, when all the myriad stars are doing their best, each with his tiny light to make up for the absence of the moon?) I can see him colour. But he has not time to answer. Light footsteps are coming along the terrace, a soft voice coming out of the twilight, says, "You, Gerald!" (Long ago have they gone back to the Gerald and Sylvia of their childhood) and he straightway forgets my existence.

The beginning of their talk is lost to me who am inside the room by the closing notes of the nymph dancing on the sands, and then again their voices come to me.

"Is that your bull-dog? What an angel!"

(If angels have broad black snarling faces, turned-up noses, squinting eyes, and tightly-curled tails, then is she right.)

"Do you like him? Will you have him?" he asks, eagerly.

To do him justice, I think he would give her the nose off his face, if she expressed a wish for it.

"N—o. I think not—I am not sure" (doubtfully). "What is his name?"

"Snap."

"*Does* he snap?" (drawing back a little).

"Not unless he takes you for a thief and a robber."

"But, supposing he were to *mistake* me for one, it would not be much good to explain to him after he had bitten me that he had formed a mistaken estimate of my character, and that I am not in the habit of appropriating other people's property."

"Are you not? I am not so sure of that" (in a tone that is half-jesting, half, as it seems to me, most bitter earnest). "There are other stealable things besides purses and silver spoons and so forth, not so valuable, I know—they might be classed under the head of the lost property that is of no value but to the owner. Sylvia" (moving a little nearer to her), "haven't you stolen my heart and my senses? *Stolen*, because you have taken them from me and given me nothing, absolutely nothing, but a few kind looks and words in return; and those" (with a smile that is not mirthful) "you give to everyone, even to the dogs and the beggars."

She does not answer, only she shrinks a little from him, and stands with downcast eyes—

"Beautiful exceedingly."

"I used to be a good-natured sort of fellow," he goes on impetuously; "now I am the surliest brute that breathes. I cannot see a fellow *look* at you without wanting to knock him down."

"I had better advise my friends to wear blue spec-

tacles," she says, laughing nervously, "so that you may not know when they *are* looking at me."

But he puts aside this little jest as though he had not heard it.

"When are you going to put an end to this? When are you going to put me out of my misery?" he says, shortening the distance which she has put between them, and standing over her tall and masterful and very comely, with his passionate blue eyes flashing in the starlight.

She looks up at him appealingly. It is not in her power to give *deliberately* to any living creature one moment's pain. If a bird or insect were writhing in death agonies before her, and she knew that one blow of hers could give death and rest, she would not have the heart, nor I verily believe the power, to give that blow. And though she does not desire Gerald either as lover or husband, she is yet very fond of him.

"Why cannot we be friends?" she says deprecatingly, stretching out a slim white hand to him, "friends and companions, as we were long ago? Why will you quarrel with me?"

"Friends!" cries the young man, passionately. "Do you think that a man could be content to be your *friend*, and nothing more? He would be a poor sort of a man if he could."

"Then," she says more firmly, but still not with the cold quiet courage necessary to the administering of an

effectual *coup-de-grace*, "then you must not come here any more. I have told you—it is not the first time, but I hope it may be the last—that I cannot marry you."

There is a momentary silence. Either his feelings are too many for him, or his words too few. I cannot see him clearly enough to tell which.

"Do not look like that, Gerald," says Sylvia presently, trying, with fatal good-nature, to soften the effect of her words. "I do not think that I shall ever marry any one. I often think that they who have so much money, so much too much money, as I have, can do a great deal more good as old maids. I want to enjoy myself a little, just while I am young, and then I shall set about seeing how much good my money can do for other people; it has never done much for me."

"*You* an old maid!" he cries, with bitter mockery (forgetting that one who may fairly lay claim to belong to that too numerous army is within earshot). "You *look* exactly cut out for one, do not you?" (surveying her faultless face, her tall, supple figure, "gowned in pure white that fitted to the shape." Sylvia is not one of your slim, willowy, blown-away-with-a-breath beauties; neither is she of the Rubenesque class, all coarse flesh and blood. She hits the happy medium between the two; no man alive would, having seen her, ever desire to improve on the perfect curves of the most perfect figure nature ever moulded—to trammel with tight stays or other

artificial devices the "bounteous wave of such a breast as never pencil drew"—the firm, round, not over-small waist). "Do you think that such divine beauty as yours was ever meant to be wasted in dreary old-maidenhood?"

"I think," she answers, very coldly this time, "that to follow the example of such a woman as Miss Burdett-Coutts—Baroness Burdett-Coutts, is not she?—would be a higher aim than to marry the best man that ever lived."

"Marry me," he urges passionately, "and on the day of our marriage you shall give your money away, every farthing of it, to whom you please. Have not I enough for both?"

She does not answer, probably she is tired of answering.

"Sylvia" (in a voice shaken with very earnestness), "tell me that you do not like me, that you cannot bear the sight of me; tell me that you like someone else better than you like me—sometimes I think that you *do* —and I will go away and never trouble you any more."

For a moment she hesitates, and I hold my breath—if she would but tell him the truth, and let him go away! But she does not.

"I cannot tell you that," she says quietly, "for I do like you. I am very fond of you, but not—not in that way."

"Then——" he begins.

But he does not go on. I, who have been watching Max for some minutes past have noticed that he has been fidgeting restlessly on his chair, that he has cast many glances towards this window—finally, that he has risen and left little Mrs. Carnegie to amuse herself as best she may, and is making his way slowly and leisurely in this direction.

"Do not you think," I say, suddenly raising my head, and reminding the two on the terrace of my close proximity, "that you had better finish your conversation somewhere else? Perhaps you do not know that you are talking so loud that no one can fail to hear you."

Sylvia looks startled, and inclined to laugh. Gerald also looks startled, but not at all inclined to laugh. Evidently he had forgotten me. But Sylvia's eyes, following mine, probably see Max approaching, for she suddenly moves away, and Gerald follows her.

I have sunk back in my chair, and am listlessly watching the stars when Max, pushing back the lace curtain, comes and leans against the shutter opposite to me.

He has been a sore puzzle to me of late. Sometimes I think that he loves Sylvia as deeply and entirely as my heart can desire. There are times when he has been *off his guard*, when I have seen him watching her, looking at her with eyes whose unuttered and unutterable tenderness no woman could mistake.

But that he is on his guard against these betrayals of himself, that he does not love her freely, generously, *gladly*, as she loves him (she does love him: that is her secret and mine, who have found it out), that also I cannot fail to see. At all times, except in these rare moments of which I speak, when he has betrayed himself to my watchful eyes—moments which no man, however firm of will and purpose, could surely guard against—he has treated Sylvia only with such kindness and courtesy as he would naturally show to his cousin and his hostess.

And I have tried anxiously to find the key to this riddle, and, I think, found it.

Sylvia is rich, and he is poor, and, what is far worse —for what would his poverty matter to her?—*proud*, and scrupulously, ridiculously honourable.

I cannot think why it was that in my schemes to bring them together I did not foresee this difficulty. I think I must have hoped that love that is stronger than death, stronger, alas! too often, than honour, might also be stronger than pride. I do hope it still. But sometimes, knowing Max's strong control over himself, and how hard, how impossible it will be to him to ask her to give her riches to patch up his poverty, I feel my heart grow faint.

"All alone, Esther?" he says, speaking to me, while his eyes go wandering out into the summer night in

search of the owners of those voices whose sounds have reached him. "Do not you miss Mr. Grayling?"

"I miss him," say I, smiling, and looking up at him, "in the sense in which the old woman must have missed the black pudding when it fell off her nose."

"Poor Mr. Grayling!" he says, absently, not looking at me (it is often my lot to receive this divided attention). "By-the-bye, has Sylvia gone to look for him? What has become of her?"

"She was here a minute ago."

"And—and Carrington?"

His eyes are on me now.

"Yes, and Carrington," I answer, being unable to help myself. "He looked in on his way home."

"I think he generally does look in" (with a curl of his lip); "he pretty well lives here."

"His mother is away, and he is lonely, I suppose. It must be pleasanter to be here than in that empty house."

"A great deal pleasanter—especially when Sylvia is here."

I glance up at him quickly, but I do not answer.

"Esther," in a voice which he tries to make indifferent, and fails. "Is she going to marry that—that boy?"

"Have you anything to say against it?" I ask, not indisposed to lead him on. "He is well-looking and well

off, and not a bad sort of fellow. I am not sure that she might not do worse."

"Is that your advice?" he says, turning fiercely on me. "I hoped you were a better adviser for her than that. So you think an empty-headed boy, whom she would govern body and soul, a good-natured slave, a husband to be desired for her—so beautiful, so wilful?"

"Wilful she may be," I retort, "and sometimes she *does* amuse herself a little too thoughtlessly for other people's good; but there never was a purer, better, more innocent girl than my Sylvia. Whether she governed, or was governed, of one thing I am sure—'whatever she does, it will sure to be right.'"

His eyes and his whole face soften.

"Do not you think I know it?" he says, in a low voice.

"Esther," he goes on presently, "do you think it is very surprising that I, and other men like me, who have been knocking about all our lives, and do not happen to have come across many *good* women, to know them intimately, should be apt to judge all from those few who make themselves conspicuous, and be thoroughly sickened of *all?*"

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I creep silently away, and going out into the night, look up to the starlit heaven above me.

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We fell out, first and foremost, about the order of our going (fell out politely, of course,—people in society always fall out politely), and in the end we all found our-

selves wrongly paired, and just where we would rather not have been.

We fell out next (still politely, of course) as to whether we should see the monastery ruins first and eat afterwards, or eat first and see the ruins after. Finally, having grown very hot, and having wasted much time over the argument, we decided to do the latter.

We have eaten, we have drunk, and are filled, and, though the afternoon is waning, and we all know that duty is impelling us to get up and do the ruins, we have, as yet, none of us moved.

Max and Gerald, having neither of them succeeded in ousting the other, have, for once, joined company, and are sitting or lying in easily elegant attitudes at Sylvia's feet. Olympia, a little way off, is making gentle love with eyes and words to Carrington, who momentarily is growing more sulky; for, though Sylvia divides her attentions as equally as she can, it is evident to the dullest onlooker that her sweetest smiles, her sweetest look[illegible] for Max.

[illegible]arnegie and my handsome sailor boy have [illegible] tree a little way off, and quite out of earshot, seem to be amusing themselves better than [illegible] us.

[illegible]he General[illegible]n vainly endeavouring to [illegible]p up the[illegible]he previous night with the [illegible]idow's h[illegible] the heat and the champagne,

and has fallen loudly, snoringly asleep, with his head on a tuft of grass by her side, and his toes as high as his head. She, sitting very upright and looking infinitely disgusted and virtuous, is casting wrathful and fiery glances in my direction; for is it not evident—too evident, to the most uninterested observer—that Mr. Grayling, who has found himself again, and is at this moment sitting on the grass a great deal too close to my side, and gazing admiringly into my eyes, is growing every moment more and more affectionate? Perhaps, if I could attribute his attentions to the potency of my attractions, my vanity might overcome my annoyance and the morbid consciousness that I am looking like a fool; but, unfortunately, I can attribute them to nothing stronger than his weak head.

And the widow is not a disinterested observer. It is true that Mr. Grayling has legs like lucifer-matches, wears clothes that look as if they had been made by Moses and Sons, and boots that are a quarter-of-a-yard square at the toes, and many sizes too large for him. It is true that he has the heart of a chicken, the nerves of a mouse, and the brain of a parrot; but in consideration of a handsome fortune safely invested in Three per cent. Consols, she, Mrs. Buxton, is willing to overlook these few trifling disadvantages, and to take him for better for worse—clothes, boots, legs, and all—if he will take her.

She therefore regards me as an interloper and a rival, and between the fire of her glances and Mr. Grayling's I am growing exceedingly hot and uncomfortable. I am almost at my wit's end, when a happy thought occurs to me—

"How warm it is," I say for the hundredth time, fanning my moist face with a big fern leaf. "Do you know I am horribly thirsty! *Would* you mind going and asking one of them to bring me some soda-water?"

The servants have been feasting at a respectful distance, and I know that it will take him a little while to get there and back again with the soda-water.

When he is safely out of sight, I spring up, and make my way over to Sylvia.

"Do not you think," I say, flurriedly breaking in on them, "that if we are to see the ruins we had better go now?"

"*Poor* Esther!" says Sylvia, looking provokingly cool, under the shade of her large white hat. "What *have* you been doing to yourself?"

"Or rather, what has Grayling been doing to you?" says Gerald.

"If he has been treating you to the weak jests and incredible stories with which he favoured us at lunch, I do not wonder you are hot and bored," says Max.

"Where does he get his wretched jokes?" asks

Sylvia. "Weak as they are, his poor little brains could not have invented them."

"'The right honourable gentleman is indebted to his memory for his jests, and to his imagination for his facts!'" says Max, quoting Sheridan.

"Punch and water," say I, putting in my word; "very little punch and a good deal of water."

"I know I wanted to punch his head," says Gerald, grumpily, whether intentionally or unintentionally guilty of a joke that might be own brother to Mr. Grayling's, I don't know.

"Sylvia," I whisper, pinching her arm to attract her attention, "do get up and come away before he comes back. If you leave me alone with him another minute, I am *certain* he will propose to me."

"What a horrible fate!" says Sylvia, bursting into such a fit of laughter that she attracts general attention to my flushed and miserable face. "Oh, Esther, if you could but know how woe-begone you look!"

But when she becomes convinced that I am really miserable she does get up, and we all stroll towards the monastery, and are well out of sight before Mr. Grayling can get back with his soda-water, if ever he does.

There is a great sameness about ruins. To me, who am not of an archæological mind, it seems that when you have seen one you have seen all.

Where the old monks once lived their miserable and

selfish lives, sang their psalms, or, if report be true, sometimes less godly songs, ate and drank, made merry or were sad, slept and rose up again, died and were buried, and did no particular harm to any one, even if they did no good to themselves, until pious Protestantism made waste their habitations and laid them even with the ground—we wander aimlessly to and fro, speculating in nineteenth-century fashion on the incomprehensibility of their ideas, forgetting that we, in our turn, may be just as incomprehensible to some one else. We have finally wandered into the little graveyard, where for so many years these men, whose lives are but a legend to us, have been quietly mouldering into dust.

The sun, that has so ruthlessly scorched and burnt us for so many hours, is sinking lower and lower in a cloud of mist, that means more heat on the morrow. A little breeze has sprung up with the dying day, and fans our hot faces as we sit on the crumbling old wall.

Sylvia is on a tombstone, trying with one white finger to trace an illegible inscription.

"I am sure it's a very good one," she says, "there is so much of it. If people had nothing good to say, they would leave it alone—on a tombstone."

Then her finger comes to some roughly scratched letters, evidently much fresher, and probably the work of some Cockney wag.

"'De mortuis nil nisi bonum,'" she reads slowly,

pronouncing every word as if it were Italian. "What does that mean?"

"'De'—of," say Olympia and I, simultaneously.

"'Mortuis,'" continues Sylvia.

A pause.

"Esther, what does 'mortuis' mean?"

"Mort—mortuary—dead. 'Of the dead,' of course," say I, triumphantly.

"'Nil'—nothing. *I* know that," says Sylvia. "Nisi bonum'?"

I look at Olympia for inspiration, but I find none.

"Bones, of course!" shouts Sylvia. "'Of the dead nothing—but bones.' How stupid you are, Esther!"

There is a roar of laughter from Max and Carrington.

"What is the matter?" asks Sylvia, hurt and dignified, looking from one to the other. "Is not that right?"

"Perfectly right," says Carrington, mendaciously. "Never heard a better translation in my life."

"Esther, I congratulate you," says Max, gravely. "Whatever else you have neglected, you have evidently given every attention to Sylvia's Latin."

"Well, I don't care," she says, with her head well up in the air. "I defy you to make more sense out of it."

And they do not. But they make a good deal of nonsense.

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But he breaks off there, seeming to recollect himself. And we fall into silence—deepest silence.

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doubt not, worse books still? And though it may be, that as the old Scotchwoman said of swearing, "It's a grand set off to conversation" so a good deal of crime is a grand set off to an impossible novel, I think I prefer the stories of men and women no better and no worse than myself, rather than the histories of the criminal peers and Aspasian peeresses with whom I have such a limited acquaintance.

Where is Sylvia?—It is growing late, and thick mists are rising from the ground, to meet the low-hanging clouds. I go out through the window which she left open, seeking her. There is neither moon nor stars, and it is almost dark—darker than summer nights ordinarily are. For a while I seek her in vain. It is a large, rambling house, and all round it, on every side, are broad stone terraces. At last, at the farthest end of one of these, I catch sight of her salmon-coloured gown gleaming faintly in the dim light She is leaning forward, with arms crossed on the balustrade, and head bent, as if she were looking at the bed of flowers underneath.

"What are you dreaming about? You will catch cold," I say, coming lightly behind her, and clasping my arms round her neck before she can see me. I could not reach so high if she were not bending forward, for she is taller than I; tall, and fair, and stately—a queen among women.

She does not answer, she does not move her head, but on my hand clasped under her neck a big, hot tear splashes suddenly.

Sylvia *crying*. My heart stands still. She is not one of those who cry for a look, a word, a thought—plentifully, foolishly, as some women will. Even as a little child her tears were so rare that when they did come, all we of her household were ready to cry too.

"Darling," I say presently, still keeping my arms about her neck, "why are you fretting? Won't you tell me?"

She does not answer; only I feel her chest heave, and another tear follows hard on the footsteps of its predecessor.

I cannot bear it any longer. I cannot stand afar off, telling myself that it is not my business to intermeddle, while my child, our little Queen, who has never been denied one wish of her heart, except that which God denied in taking her mother from her, is in sore trouble.

"My dear," I say, very low, still holding her with tenderest clasp, "do you think Max does not love you?"

She flings my hands roughly away, and, raising her head, stares at me with flashing eyes.

"*Max!* What are you talking about? What do you suppose Max is to me, or I to him? Loves me! *Of course* he loves me" (with a most bitter laugh). "Do not *all* cousins love each other?"

But I cannot answer her; I can only stand silently looking at her, and I suppose that my love and my sorrow show themselves in my face, for in a moment the poor little pitiful pretence breaks down, and she falls to sobbing—

"Esther, how *dare* you speak to me of him?" she cries, dashing the tears away. "Do you want to shame me? Am I not shamed enough already?"

"What question is there of shame?" I answer, hotly, angry that she should use the word to herself.

"Is it not a thing to be ashamed of—a pitiful, mean, poor-spirited thing to love a man who does not love me? —I," she goes on wildly, clasping her hands, "*I*, who in my vanity thought that I had only to wish and to have, as far as men's liking goes. Well, there is not much vanity left in me now—God knows I have not much cause for it. Esther" (looking at me with eyes still wet with unwiped tears), "do you know that you, and all of you who have spoilt me so, have done me an ill turn after all? It makes it harder now that the first thing I have *really* set my heart upon is denied me."

I cannot answer her. I am too sorry for her.

"I do love Max," she goes on, with a sudden flush, which even the semi-darkness cannot hide, burning over cheek, and brow, and soft white throat. "I—I do not know that there is much good in pretending to you that I do not. I love him so much that I do not think that

there is anything I would not do to gain his love." Her voice breaks into a sob, and the tears are rolling down her cheeks, and I can only stand stupidly silent, knowing of nothing that I can say to comfort her.

"But," she goes on, trying to smile—such a poor pitiful little smile—"I do not mean to break my heart, for all that. I never believed in the people who died of love—the people in novels and stories—did I, Esther? It always seemed to me there must be something weak about them—weak and cowardly. It is like saying to God, as a spoilt child says to its father, 'If you will not give me the one toy on which my heart is set, then I will have none.' Esther" (looking at me very wistfully), "I could bear it—I *would* bear it—but it would be so much easier, if I were not so *ashamed* as well as so miserable."

"Ashamed of what?" I ask, taking her hands, and drawing her to me. "My darling, what can you mean, what have *you* ever done that you can be ashamed of?"

"Do you know," she says, drooping her head, and avoiding my eyes, while again a painful flush spreads up to her very forehead, "that I have not only been foolish enough to love the one man who has shown me plainly enough that he does not desire my love; but my folly—my miserable vanity—I always was vain, you know, Esther—made me dupe myself into the ridiculous belief that he loved me? I did not believe it for long—he" (with a

miserable laugh) "did not leave me much ground for believing it long; but there were two days, two nights, when I—fool that I was!—could have sworn to you he loved me."

"He did love you—he does love you!" I cry, moved by an irresistible impulse. "Whatever else you may doubt, do not doubt that."

She draws her hands away, and stands looking at me.

"What do you mean? Are you trying to help me to deceive myself? Do not do that—you mean well, I dare say" (a little coldly), "but that will not do me any good."

"My dear," I say very quietly, dropping all excitement, "it will not do you any good, that I know,—not any real good; for it seems to me that to break down the barrier which stands between you and Max is beyond my power or yours; and yet if it will be any comfort to you, and awhile ago you said it would, be very sure that he loves you."

"Are you mad?" she cries, with tremulous voice. "If he loves me, what should stand between him and me? Cannot he come to me? Cannot he tell that I love him?—Heaven knows that sometimes I have thought that I have shown it only too plainly."

"Money stands between you," I answer, laconically.

"Money!" (in utter surprise). "Do you mean

because he is *poor?* What should that matter to me, who have so much?"

"That is just it. It is not so much that he has so little, as that you have so much."

"Esther, do you mean to tell me that Max—Max, who knows me, and knows how little I care for money—would let that stand between us for a moment *if he loved me?*"

"Love is not everything in a man's life," say I, sticking to my argument, "though it is much, very much to a man like Max, who has not cut up his heart into a dozen pieces to give to a dozen different women. But his *pride* was born with him, brought up and strengthened and fostered with every year of his life, and his pride would tell him that he, so poor, so ruined, had no right to ask you, who are so rich, to give yourself and your money to him. His honour—we all know that Max is honourable to a fault—would tell him that he ought not to take advantage of the generosity of a girl so unprotected as you are, and that the world would call him a fortune-hunter, and though his sense ought to tell him also that it does not matter a pin what the world calls him, yet men have very little sense,—of that sort." (This as a saving clause.)

She stands with hands clasped, head drooped, quite silent.

"I did think, I did hope," I go on presently, "that

while he was here, near you, seeing you every day, his love might betray him in spite of himself, and that honour (I think I hate the word) might then go over to the other side and take the part of love. It *did* betray him to you and to me; it betrayed him so far that I am *sure*, as sure as that I live and breathe, that he loves you. But I am also sure that he did not know that it did; that he thinks that all that he said and did—people do not know how they *look*—would pass muster as cousinly affection, but that his only security for the future is in keeping away from you."

"If he loves me, . . . if I could be sure, quite sure of that," she says, very slowly, with a sort of passionate happiness shining like a glory in her lovely eyes, "then I could bear anything else."

Her look and her words smite me with pity and despair.

"My dear," I say almost angrily, "I do not see what good that can do you, or him either. As far as I can see you will both of you go to your graves, neither of you the wiser nor the better for each other's love."

"Surely," she says, looking at me wistfully, "sooner or later he will understand that I love him, and that it will make me unhappy if he stays away from me. Surely, if he loves me it will all come right."

"How can it?" I cry, sorely vexed with myself that

I have helped her to build up a hope on such unsubstantial foundations. "You cannot ask him to marry you, and he will *never* ask you. There is only one end to it that I can foresee. He will go back to India, and you will marry someone else."

"I shall never marry anyone else," she says resolutely, "as long as he loves me."

"I do not see that it will do you much good to be an old maid," I answer, wretchedly.

The determination of my despair seems to force itself upon her.

"Is there nothing to be done?" she says presently, perplexity and pain mingling with and chasing away her short-lived happiness.

"As far as I can see, nothing," I answer, despairingly. "Unless you can manage to lose all your money."

"And I suppose there is no chance of that?" (in quite as hopeless a tone as mine).

"None whatever, unless Mr. Silverthorne" (the honestest and the richest lawyer in England) "would decamp with it, and I am afraid" (with a wretched little laugh) "we must not build upon that."

She turns away and goes silently into the house, I following at a distance, longing sorely, miserably, to retract the hard words I have spoken,—to give her some comfort, however false. But I know that hard words

are sometimes kinder than soft ones. I know too that meaning only to rob her sorrow of its bitterest sting, the idea that she had given her love unsought, unreturned, I have already given her a hope which is crueller than doubt, and I dare not retract one of them.

CHAPTER VI.

Two days later the bad weather culminates in a thunder-storm. It is not by any means a terrifying storm; arrant coward that I am, I cannot feel any real terror at these muttering, grumbling, far-distant rolls, these faint, rain-washed flashes of lightning; but I can feel a very real headache, which is with me, and with a good many other people, the sure accompaniment of a thunder-storm.

After lunch, I and my headache retire into solitude, being bad company for Sylvia. I choose a little room leading out of the drawing-room, that is darker and more secluded than all the rest—a little oriental-looking room, with *portières* of rich Turkish embroidery, walls that are in imitation of the Alhambra, and divans of cushions almost level with the ground, and which has on one side a fernery wherein grows ferns of every class and country, where lichen-covered rocks, trailing creepers, and drip-

ping water make a rest for eyes and brain as beautiful as taste and Sylvia could devise.

Here, lulled by the monotonous drip, drip of the water, by the utter stillness, by the heaviness of the atmosphere, and the greater heaviness of my own head, I fall soundly, deeply asleep. Heaven knows in what other dream-world I may live over again the troubles of this. *I* do not know. For the space of two hours or more I—Esther Gray, of the county of ———, spinster —do not consciously exist; I am a breathing, dreamless, thoughtless automaton.

I wake slowly, confusedly, with a sound of voices in my ears. They do not come to me very distinctly—they are muffled by intervening curtains; but they are audible for all that, and they are Sylvia's and Max's. At first I listen vaguely, stupidly, as one does on awakening from deep sleep.

"You do not really mean it?" Sylvia is saying, and to me there seems much disquiet in her tones. "At first you told me you were going to stay six months, and now,—to go in a fortnight."

"I have done all that I can do at home," he answers hurriedly, disjointedly; "and my regiment is at Malta now. I can easily get home if I am wanted—but I am doing no good here; it is better that I should go, far better."

"Do you think," he goes on quickly, as if this last

speech requires some explanation, "that there can be any particular pleasure in many months of idleness, spent as I have spent mine?—in noting the progress that moth and rust, poverty and neglect, have made in my house and belongings since I was home last; in seeing my mother living on scraps, and wanting in the most ordinary surroundings of a lady's life—and have no power to help either?"

For a minute she is silent, and I have time to collect my wits. My first thought is of intense gladness that through my fortunate headache, my more fortunate nap, they are for once alone together without the restraint of a third person's presence. My second is not by any means so cheerful an one. Unless I wish to play the disagreeable part of eavesdropper, or to effectually put a stop to anything they may have to say to each other, I am caught in a trap from which I shall have to exert all my ingenuity to escape; for between the *portières* which divide this room from the drawing-room there is a distinct gap of two or three inches, through which, on raising my head, I can clearly see both Sylvia and Max. If I creak, or rustle, or if they happen to glance this way while I am moving, I am done for. Stealthily I draw my skirts together, but before I dare to move a step I am arrested. Sylvia is speaking.

"Max, there is something I want to say to you," she begins, in a trembling voice, and, impelled by irresistible

curiosity, I, looking at her, can see that her face, naturally of a delicate cream-white, wears now the pallor of intense excitement. "Do not be angry—I could not bear it if you were very angry with me."

He does not speak, but his face is as white almost as hers.

"Always," the girl goes on with clasped hands and most earnest face, "my money has been a burden to me, keeping real friends from me, bringing false ones around me. I think that my mother knew that it would be so when she was dying. I think that she wished and hoped that part of it might go to redeem the old place, to restore the dear old home she loved so much, and my father wished it too, because he cared for nothing so much as to please her. Max, take half of my money and do this for *her* sake, not for your own. Simply do it for me as the most fitting memorial I can pay to her. The other half will leave me over rich, and I shall be happier, far happier than ever I have been in my life."

The tears are in her lovely pleading eyes, and her lips are quivering. Can any man living resist her? I forget that I am listening. I forget everything. I hold my breath waiting for his answer.

"My dear," he says presently, and it seems to me there is a tremor in his low voice, the pallor of hardly-suppressed passion on his grave dark face, "if it were

possible for me to take money from any woman living, I would take it from you,—but it is not possible."

There is silence for a moment, dead silence, and in that moment, I, seizing the opportunity, with skirts gathered tightly together, make hurriedly on tiptoe for the fernery door. It is a heavy glass door, and it requires a good push to send it open. While I am standing in fear and trembling with my hands upon it, Sylvia speaks again.

"Is there no way" (in a low intense voice) "you could take money from a woman—from me."

. . . . Then gathering all my courage I give one strong silent push, and I flee swiftly, neither pausing nor looking back, through the fernery, through the billiard-room, and thence, by a circuitous round to my own room, and there I fall on my knees by the bedside, and with heart beating with overmastering excitement, with every nerve of brain and body strained to one intense, fervent wish, one voiceless humble prayer, I pass the long slow minutes that carry with them, I know, my darling's fate.

* * * * * *

How many hours have passed since I came here, or are they only minutes? I cannot tell. I only know that they have taken with them all hope, and faith, and trust; for Sylvia has not come to me, and am I not sure that if they had brought to her such happiness as I had prayed

they might, she would have come straight to me to share it with her?

The little Dresden china clock on my mantelpiece has chimed seven, when I, unable to wait any longer, smooth my ruffled appearance and go out of my room to look for her.

But I look in vain. High and low, upstairs and downstairs I go seeking her, but she is nowhere to be found. At last on seeing me look into Sylvia's room for the second time, her maid, laying out her dinner-dress volunteers some information.

"My mistress is out, ma'am."

"Out!" I repeat stupidly; "why, it is raining."

"I met her on the stairs in her cloak and hat, ma'am, and she told me that she was going out, and you was not to wait dinner for her if she was late."

"Very well," I say quietly, with as good an assumption of indifference as I can command at a moment's notice. How many farces do we play out, how many lies do we tell, for our servants' sake? valuing their good opinion a good deal more highly than they seem to value ours.

It is for their sake I order dinner when half-past eight has come and has not brought Sylvia; it is for their sake that I swallow (horribly conscious of the watchful eyes upon my plate) food that seems to choke me; it is for their sake that I am found sitting carelessly in the

drawing-room with a book open before me, whenever any duty brings them in, instead of waiting anxiously on the doorstep or wandering out into the rain in search of my child as I am longing to do.

It is quite dark, and the lamps have been brought in when I, wandering restlessly to and fro, up and down, hear a footstep in the hall, and I know that she has come home at last. I think I must have been growing more frightened than I had acknowledged to myself, to feel so intense a relief at the bare knowledge that she is safe and within my reach, but I wait a little while before I go to her.

At last, with a faltering heart, but a brave and common-place aspect, I go up, and knocking at her door, open it without waiting for an answer.

She is sitting upright on a chair, with her hands hanging listlessly by her side, and her face is white and drawn and *blank*, as if with a passion or a grief that has worn itself down to the last stage of dulness and stupidity.

"My dear," I say briskly, going up to her, "whatever possessed you to go out in the rain? and it is so late too. Have you had your dinner?"

She looks at me as if she heard my voice in her dreams, or a long way off, but her eyes do not brighten or waken, and I am growing thoroughly frightened.

"Queenie, my darling, what is the matter? Won't

you speak to me? Won't you tell me?" I say imploringly, seeing it is no longer any good to pretend that nothing is wrong with her. I lay my hand on her rough wet sleeve. I try to draw her to me, but my touch seems to break through the lethargy into which she has fallen.

"Do not touch me! do not touch me!" she cries, shrinking from me, and looking at me with a strange passion glowing in her dull miserable eyes. "In a little while I may be able to bear it, in a little while I may be able to forgive you, but not yet, not yet."

For a moment I feel as if she had struck me a blow straight through the heart. I stand motionless, dumb.

"Why could you not leave me alone? Why need you have meddled with me?" she cries, coming nearer and grasping my arm with a hand so feverishly hot that it seems to burn into my flesh. "God knows that I was miserable enough before, but I knew that Max did not love me, and I had made up my mind to it, and at least I had no burthen of shame, actual *shame*, to carry about with me, burning in my heart until I die. Esther, why need you have gone out of your way to convince me against my reason that Max loved me? Do you know what you have done?" (releasing my arm and clasping her hands wildly above her head). "Do you know that because I was sure, so sure that only the barrier of my

horrible money and his pride stood between us, and would stand between us always—always, unless I broke it down, and because he was going away, I offered him my money, almost, I think" (with a most miserable laugh) "offered him *myself?*"

I do not speak. I cannot. Is it true, I am asking myself miserably, confusedly—is it true that I have so cruelly injured her whom I most wished to serve?

"He pretended that he did not understand; he pretended to think that I only wanted to offer him my money, being so generous," she goes on, pacing up and down with hands still tightly clenched as if in actual physical pain. "He affected to treat it lightly, though he pitied me. I could see that he *pitied* me, but he would not have me or my money. . . . I understood that somehow. . . . I think I must almost have gone mad after he left me. I think I was ready to kill myself; it seems to me even now that it would be a good deal easier to die than live."

"Do not say that!" I cry miserably. "I cannot bear it."

"Easier to die, but not better," she goes on presently, not noticing me. "It is only those poor weak wretches who are unable to retrieve the blunders they have made in this world who want to go to another, as if" (with a heart-breaking smile) "utter failure in one world were a sure guarantee of success in the next. No; there must

be a better way out of it than that—a way to convince him" (flushing hotly, painfully) "that it was all a mistake; but I am too tired to think of it to-night—too tired."

She throws herself back into her chair as she speaks, and her hands and her head droop wearily. It is evident to me that she is utterly worn out in body and mind.

"Dear!" I say gently, deprecatingly, coming a little nearer to her, "won't you take off your wet clothes, and go to bed? Won't you let me help you? You will be ill—you have eaten nothing——"

She raises her head, and points to the door.

"Go away, and leave me," she answers, coldly. "I want to be alone."

And I go. For the first time in her life, I leave her with a trouble I am unable to share. God pity those poor souls who have helped all unwittingly to lay burdens on those they love most tenderly. . . . Surely it must seem to them, as it seems to me, that it would have been better that they had died first.

* * * * * *

Worn out with crying and sorrow, I have fallen deeply, heavily asleep. I wake suddenly—startledly. A hand is laid on mine, and, in the faint grey dawn of day, I can see a tall, white-robed figure standing over me.

"Do not be frightened, Esther," says Sylvia's voice

very gently. "It is I. I could not sleep, I could not rest, until I had told you how sorry I am for the cruel things I said to you this evening."

My arms are about her neck now. My tears are falling on her cold white face.

"It was my own vanity misled me, not you. I always was vain, you know" (with a poor little smile), "and that made it easy for me to believe you."

"It is all a blunder—a wretched blunder," I say, forlornly. "It is past my comprehension. Even now, I am sure there is a great mistake somewhere."

She does not answer. Her head droops weariedly on my shoulder, and I feel her shiver with the cold which heralds the approach of a new day, even in the heat of summer; and when I soothe her, and caress her with loving, tender words, she falls suddenly to bitter weeping —cruel, tearing sobs, that seem to shake her whole frame. I do not try to stop them. I know that when a sorrow has passed the first stage of dumb agony, its heaviest weight is lessened.

I silently and gently lay her in my bed—she is very docile now; and then I watch by her side, as I have so often done when she was a little child, breaking her heart for loss of her mother, until she sobs herself to sleep.

As the morning advances, the sun—so long a stranger or but a fitful visitor to us—rises royally from his bed of

gold and purple, and the birds sing gladdest hallelujahs of joyful surprise.

One bright ray creeping in, falls aslant on my darling's white face and shows how wan and worn it is; and I, silently rising, draw the curtains to shut it out, lest it should kiss her heavy lids too hotly, and break through the sleep which God sends as His most precious gift to His tired and sorrowful children.

CHAPTER VII.

A FORTNIGHT after the day of the thunder-storm, I am walking homeward through the wood which skirts round one half of Sylvia's estate, forming a sort of border land between the Cedars and Lyndhurst. I have been to visit some of the people living in a little village which lies in a hollow at the foot of Lyndhurst—a cluster of damp, ill-drained, dilapidated cottages to whose poverty-stricken, unhealthy tenants Sylvia is constantly sending bountiful gifts of soups and wines, and other good things.

I have been the bearer of her lavish-handed charity to-day. I have heard her blessed by pallid lips. I have seen the light come into poor tired eyes, weary of looking on at a world whose injustice is so sore a strain on their poor weak faith, weary of looking heavenward to a God who seems as if He will not hear, even though they pray but for bare bread to put into their little children's

mouths.—Poor souls! Poor souls! Even if their faith hold out but a little, are they not braver a hundred times than we who have so much, and yet are willing to doubt God if He deny us but one thing?—I have seen little hungry mouths filled, bright childish eyes that ill-health and poverty have not yet dimmed grow brighter with happy laughter.—Is it not a good thing to be rich, if with so little trouble one can give so much happiness? I think if I had much money I would spend it all in feeding and clothing little hungry naked children, and leave the preaching to them to others. It would be so much easier for them to believe in God's love if they knew what love meant—Poor little children!

I have sent away the carriage, having many visits to pay, and have undertaken to walk home; but the sun, who, tired of hiding himself so long, has been scorching and smiting us with all his power through these latter days of July, has left the highroad so baked and dusty that I have chosen the shadier path through the woods, which, though it winds about a good bit before it takes one out into the park, is certainly preferable.

And as I walk slowly along, wearied with the close cottage rooms, I fall to thinking sadly enough of the past fortnight, and of Sylvia, who, though she gives happiness to others, has so little herself.

Is it possible that it is *only* a fortnight? It seems to me double, treble that time, for though each day has

seemed to go gaily enough, though Sylvia has ridden and driven hither and thither, has boated, and fished, and played lawn-tennis (always with Gerald Carrington, who returned the very day after Max's visit, for a companion); though she has laughed and talked with a more reckless gaiety than usual to her, and seemed, if possible, more insatiable of amusement and occupation than ever she was before, I, watching her, have carried through them a sorer heart than I have ever known yet. She may have deceived every one else; she has not deceived me. In the mornings I notice that her eyes are heavy with weeping or want of sleep. At any chance footstep, she starts and pales suddenly. I think she wonders, as I do, whether Max will come to see us before he leaves England. I do not know whether she most wishes or fears to see him; but I sometimes hope that when he has gone right away it may be better for her. I cannot tell.

The afternoon is waning, and the sun no longer riding above us is sinking lower and lower and sending bright golden rays piercing through the lower branches of the trees, that make little dancing spots of light on the dark gnarled old trunks, on the lighter stems of the saplings, and the pale soft green mosses under my feet; but I do not hurry—Sylvia is out riding with Gerald, and even if she should return before I do she will not want me, *nor will he.* I cannot lend my help to build up the hopes

which I see rising higher and higher, fed by her uncertain kindness. I cannot give him a cordial welcome when he comes day after day, and I fear he looks upon me as his enemy rather than his friend.

The little path through which I am lazily wending my way ends in a low rough gate, whence it breaks off and divides into two—one leading very much to the right and towards Lyndhurst Abbey, the other to the left, and to a small gate in Sylvia's park palings, of which I have the key.

It does not surprise me to see that two people—a man and a woman—are leaning over this gate in earnest conversation, lovers evidently. It is a pretty place, and a lonely, and for all I know may be a frequent trysting-place for Corydon and his Phillis. I smile lazily to myself as I picture the sheepish faces with which they will start apart and stand awkwardly gaping while I go through the gate, with never a word to say to each other, until I am well out of earshot. But when I come a little nearer to them—near enough to see the girl's face turned this way, so near that if her eyes were raised she could not fail to see me—I am a little surprised to recognize Lucy Bowden, a girl about whom there was much talk in these parts some six years ago. She is the daughter of the bailiff of a Sir Charles Grahame, whose estate lies on the other side of Lyndhurst—a beauty educated above her station, a coquette, if report speaks

truly about whose misdoings evil tongues wagged freely when she first came home from school; but of late years I have heard nothing of her, and when we have passed her in the village it has seemed to me that her fresh and buxom beauty has sadly changed.

Her head is bent; from her attitude, I could fancy that she is *crying*. I glance curiously from her to her lover—for surely he must be her lover, to meet her in this wise. His head is stooped, his hands are holding hers—the back of his grey jacket is alone visible. Men's backs are very much alike—and yet—my heart stands still. Another step or two brings me within sound of his voice, of his words.

"My dear," he is saying, in a troubled tone, "I cannot promise you more than that. I wish to God you had never seen me . . . . ."

For a moment I stand spell-bound—then I turn and flee precipitately the way I came. When I am well out of sight, out of sound of them, I sink down on the ground and rest my head against the broad trunk of a tree. There is no longer any room for doubt. Men's backs, broad shouldered, grey-clad may be mistaken; men's voices seldom; Max's voice *never;* I should know it among a thousand. For awhile I am too stunned by the startlingness of my discovery even to think or feel; but after awhile the cruel irony of the situation, the remembrance of my own wretched joke

about the village beauty, moves me to bitter silent laughter, and from laughing I very nearly fall to crying.

Among all the thoughts which jostle each other confusedly in my brain only one remains clear—I cannot see Max, I cannot touch his hand or look into his face, without telling him that I am the possessor of his miserable secret. Of one thing only am I determined,—there shall be no more deceit between us.

I do not know how long I sit there, it may be half-an-hour or more when a step coming along the path rouses me from my forlorn attitude.

No need to think how I shall meet him. No time to consider what I shall say to him. He, Max, is here, close upon me.

"Esther!" he says, amazedly, as I start up from the ground and reveal myself.

"Yes, *I*" (with a bitter laugh). "You did not know that I was here—that I had seen you!"

No answer, only he looks very pale and stern.

"So *that*," I continue passionately, with a little jerk of my head in the direction in which Lucy Bowden may be supposed to have gone, "is the attraction that has kept you away from us. So that is the reason you could not care for——"

I break off abruptly. In my anger I have nearly spoken words that I had better have cut off my tongue than have uttered.

He seizes my hands.

"Could not care for—go on—what were you going to say?" he cries, imperiously, holding me in so tight a grasp that I could cry out for pain.

"Nothing . . . . everything," I stammer confusedly, trying to retrieve my mistake. "Everything, that is, that a young man of your age ought to care for."

He drops my hands and stands apart. He asks no more questions.

"Am I to congratulate you?" I go on, bitterly, passionate indignation at the slight that has been put on my darling, anger and remorse at my own mistaken judgment of him, overmastering me. "Is that the future mistress of Lyndhurst? Has Lady Eleanor welcomed her daughter-in-law? or perhaps you are only *amusing* yourself, and is she not to be your wife at all?"

A minute's reflection would teach me that they are cruel, and what is worse, unlady-like words. But it is those wanting minutes that have to answer for all the unkind things we say and do, and, having said and done, would give half our lives to retract.

At any rate *he* does not answer in haste. He stands opposite me, with his arms folded and his eyes fixed very gravely upon me, but though his face is very pale and worried, he does not look in the least *ashamed*, as he ought to do.

"As far as I know she will be my wife," he answers,

deliberately. "As you have found out so much, I do not know that there is any harm in your knowing all."

"Oh, Max, Max!" I cry, forgetting everything but my old fondness for him, and the great hopes we all had of him, "have you of whom we thought so much, have you, who are old enough to be so much wiser, let your fancy run away with you like any foolish, love-sick boy?"

"Have you yet to learn," he asks, bitterly, "that there are marriages with which neither fancy nor love have anything to do?"

"Then you have been entrapped into it," I cry, hastily, "this girl has——"

He interrupts me.

"Do not say anything against her. The girl, as far as I know, is a good girl; at any rate she has been faithful to me. No, if I have been entrapped it has been by my own folly—but I do not know" (with a wretched laugh) "that that makes it much easier to bear."

"Why did you do it, what could have possessed you?" I cry, smiting my hands together in passionate despair as I realize that it is *this* that stands between Sylvia and him.

"What possesses most men when they cut their own throats?" he answers, chafing restlessly. "I think I called the particular weapon which I used against myself, *honour*."

I do not speak. What good can any words do now?

"It all came about," he goes on quickly, as if the mere telling of it were horribly distasteful to him, "when I was home last—six years ago. I was twenty-four then, neither so old nor so wise, as, according to you, I should be now. The place was horribly dull, my father just dead, and you and Sylvia shut up with Mr. Brandon—who was dying too—and I was horribly idle. She, Lucy," (he reddens as he says the name,) "was always about the place. She used to read to my mother, and work for her, I believe. I was always coming across her—not in my mother's presence, but out of it—when I was walking, or riding, or strolling with a cigar after dinner. God knows how it was, *I* don't; I only know that the meetings were not of *my* contrivance."

I smile to myself, but I do not give him the benefit of my thoughts.

"She was a pretty girl, and I used to walk a little way with her sometimes. Once or twice I saw her home at night, when it seemed to me over late for her to be walking alone. I may have kissed her once or twice" (reddening hotly under his bronze skin) "and I gave her a trinket or two I had brought from India—worthless toys that pleased the poor child's vanity—but I had no more thought of doing her harm, I swear to you, Esther, than I had of marrying her."

"I believe you," I say, quietly.

"There came a night," he goes on, hurriedly, breathing fast, "when I walked home with her, as I have told you I had done once or twice before. I went into her cottage (that I had never done before). I was standing in the doorway saying 'Good-night,' when her father—drunken brute—came in behind us. He did not fall on me—coward!—but on her. He heaped on her all the foul names he could muster—finally, he struck her."

"And you?" (breathlessly).

"And I?—Did what every other man would have done in my place—stood by her, and protected her against him; did what a good many other young fools might have done—in my rage against him, my remorse at having brought insult on her—promised to marry her."

My poor Max! It is easy to understand now.

"Even then I had the sense to make one condition," he continues, gloomily: "that I could not marry her until my mother should be dead; and that if any word of it ever reached her in her lifetime, then I should be free from my promise. That" (with a bitter smile) "has kept my future father-in-law quiet all this time."

"And you mean to marry her, *really?*"

"Did I not tell you," he answers, astonished, "I had given her my word? I will confess to you" (he adds, presently, with some hesitation) "that sometimes I have

hoped that *she* would tire of an engagement with which her heart could never have had much to do, and would set me free. I believe I hoped it even until to-day; but if I did, I am disappointed."

"She will not?" I ask, eagerly.

He shakes his head.

"And you will marry her?" I ask, for the second time.

"Of course I shall marry her!" (a little disdainfully).

"And you call that *honour?*" I cry, passionately. "To marry a girl for whom you have not one particle of love, and make her miserable and yourself too. Well; we call things by different names. I call it *folly*. I suppose," I go on (scarcely thinking what I say), "that it would make no difference to you if another woman loved you. You would break her heart as well as your own, and still call it honour."

The eager light of intense passion comes into his face one moment, and then dies away.

"Esther," he says, quietly, "once or twice you have *hinted* things which I might make you explain, but I will not."

So we stand silent.

"Good-bye!" I say, miserably, holding out my hand. "I suppose there is nothing more to be said; if we talked till doomsday it would not do any good."

He holds my hand, but he does not say good-bye.

I look earnestly and sorrowfully into his face, marked with so many lines during these last years. I note the grey hairs that are already showing themselves in his light brown beard.

"Suppose," I say quickly, moved by I know not what impulse, "*you* were to fall in love when it was too late?"

He looks back into my eyes with his sad ones.

"Have I kept my secret so well, Esther?" he says, sorrowfully.

The quick tears of sympathy come into my eyes.

"Sometimes I have thought that you and she must know it. Sometimes I have thought that the effort to hide from her how utterly I love her would drive me mad. God help me!" (throwing up his arms with a passionate gesture); "how do men bear these things? She is so sweet, and her sweetness is not for me—so beautiful, and her beauty and her love are not for me. Esther, don't you see, don't you understand that I am going away because I cannot stay near her?"

The tears are rolling down my cheeks now, and falling on my smart grey gown.

"My poor Max! My poor fellow!" (stretching out my hands to him).

He kisses me kindly and gravely.

"Good-bye, Esther; you have always been my best

friend. God bless you! I know you would have wished me better luck."

"I would have given the rest of my life to bring you two together," I sob, disconsolately.

He drops my hand, and turns away, when I, struck by a sudden painful thought, call after him. When he faces me, I hardly dare frame my question—

"Am I to tell Sylvia?"

His face darkens gloomily, and he is silent, hesitating.

"If it is right, tell her; it is part of my punishment, I suppose. I do not know that it is not the worst part. But do not tell her that I have dared to love her—that would be only an insult now."

"Shall I see you again?" I say, unwilling to part from him—perhaps for many years—so unhappily.

"I shall come once. I could not go away without seeing her once more; but it will be good-bye for a very long time. After that, please God, I will never see her again until one of us, or both, are married."

And so he goes.

* * * * * *

That night I tell Sylvia. I do not know in what lame and stumbling fashion I get through my story. I only know that while I am telling her, aye, even when I have done, I do not dare to look in her face.

And when I cease speaking she is silent—horribly

silent. But in a minute she bursts into a fit of wild laughter, rocking herself to and fro, as though her merriment were altogether uncontrollable.

"I congratulate you, Esther," she says, when she can speak. "You have shown your usual foresight. Do you remember your little joke about the village beauty, that you would keep harping on? You were right. You were right, and I was wrong. O my God!" (tossing her arms above her head) "how wrong! how utterly wrong!"

I do not speak, and presently she falls to pacing up and down the room, with hands tightly clenched in front of her.

"I thought him good, and noble, and *proud*. Yes! laugh at me as much as you will—proud of himself and his old and honourable name; *he*, who will stoop to marry a girl whom not one of the farmers round here would make his honest wife; *he*, who will put her in his proud old mother's place. *My* mother's home," she says, passionately.

"You are hard on him," I say, rising to go, for it seems to me it is best to leave her in her present mood. "His only fault lies in holding honour too high."

"You are credulous, Esther," she says, bitterly. "A man who will forget all other considerations to gratify an ignoble passion, will naturally try to justify himself."

I turn away, hurt and angry.

"If you must say these things, say them to some one else. I will not hear you. Surely his misfortunes might make any woman forbear sneering at him; most of all, you, for whom he cares so much—of whom he speaks so tenderly and reverently."

I forget that he has forbidden me to tell her that he cares for her. I forget that to her it may seem that she has just cause of anger against him. I am fond of Max, and I know that he is in sore trouble. It wounds me that she should speak so bitterly of him.

My foot is on the window-sill when she lays her hand with so firm a grasp on my arm that she compels me to look round.

Her face is white with a passionate anger I have never seen there before. Her voice, when she speaks, is changed and harsh.

"Esther," she says, very slowly and emphatically, "I have forgiven you once already, but if ever again you couple my name with *Lucy Bowden's lover*, I will never forgive you as long as I live."

And then she releases my arm, and leaves me; and I go out into the twilight alone.

By some strange chance, the spot where I stand to-night is the very same where little more than a month ago, I, gazing up into the starlit skies, wondered whether Sylvia's mother, looking down from heaven, might see her happy child.

But surely, surely, if heaven be *happiness*, as we who are weary and heavy-laden most earnestly believe it is, God cannot let the mothers there know how it fares with the children they have left behind them in this most sorrowful world.

So I, looking up into the dull and clouded skies, with eyes dim with tears, heart heavy with sorrow, think to-night.

CHAPTER VIII.

Two days later I am sitting in lonely dignity under one of the big cedars that have given their name to Sylvia's house. I am in a rocking-chair; by my side is a little table with our afternoon tea in delicate Worcester cups, at my feet Sylvia's favourite collie. All around me my giant protector throws its mighty shadow athwart the soft short grass that slopes down—down in long unbroken stretches of freshest verdure to the water that lies like a shining mirror glistening in the golden afternoon sunlight. It sounds very pleasant, does it not? I ought to be thanking God that I am not, as other women are, forced to toil in yonder scorching sunshine for bare and bitter bread, but able to sit here at my ease in the shadow, in my comfortable chair, with my book in my lap, sipping my fragrant Bohea. And yet, oh my friends, I doubt not there may be lighter hearts under the lilac cotton

gowns, happier faces under the tilted sun-bonnets that I can dimly see in yonder distant hay-field than either yours or mine.

For the hundredth time I try to take up my book and put away my thoughts, and for the hundredth time I fail. I let it lie in my lap, and fall to watching the lengthening shadows as they creep across the grass.

Two figures come into view from the bend by the water—a man and a woman—Gerald and Sylvia. While they are yet a good way off they stand still, stand so an unnecessarily long while it seems to me, face to face, hand to hand; and then he goes, lingering once or twice to look after her, and she comes across the grass alone.

In her hand she holds some water-lilies, whose dark wet leaves drip down upon her trailing white gown. The gowns of the present day are certainly a great advantage to the well-made women. Awhile ago, amid crinoline and many folds, it was hard to tell what manner of woman was hidden within. Now, there is not much room for doubt. On the other hand, they tell sadly against the short and fat little women of the breadth and extent of whose proportions nothing is any longer left to the imagination. But Sylvia can afford to wear them. She looks as she comes towards me like Madge Robertson looked when Galatea stepped down from her pedestal.

"What have you done to Gerald?" I say, as she comes nearer. "Is he not going to honour us with his company, *as usual?*"

"He is coming to dinner, but he has gone home to change. He got wet getting these." (Looking at her water-lilies, whose petals are already fast closing up.)

"What a preux chevalier!" I say, sarcastically. "Have you been playing at la belle dame sans merci, Queenie? Water instead of lions?"

She does not answer; she flings her lilies on the ground, and she comes and kneels by my side and looks in my face.

"Esther," she says softly, "I want you to say a great many pretty things to me."

Looking back at her, at her deep sweet eyes, her pale most lovely face, it seems to me that I should not find that at all difficult, if I were a man. But something in her look, half-wistful, half, as it seems to me, defiant, makes my heart sink low.

"My dear," I answer gently, "are there not enough people to say pretty things to you, without me?"

She hesitates strangely and drops her eyes.

"Do not people always say nice things to you when" (laughing nervously) "when you tell them that you are going to be married?"

Silence then, dead silence. Is it the change in my face that is reflecting itself in hers?

"Going to be married!" I echo at last, with most incredulous accent.

"Yes, going to be married," she says slowly, twice over, as if she would impress it on my dull brain. "Going to be married to Gerald Carrington."

Another silence, more miserable than the last. I would give the world for something, *anything*, to say, but for the life of me I cannot find one word.

She rises from the ground, and stands a little apart, with her hands clasped behind her.

"Have you anything to say against it, Esther? Can you tell me any reason why I should not marry him?" she asks presently, anger growing in her eyes.

I could tell her a hundred, but I have not got them ready. I think I am dazed, stunned. Over and over again, in my confused brain, her own words keep ringing monotonously, "Going to be married! Going to be married!" and mingling with them, deadening the sense of them, comes the memory of other words, heard such a little while, such a very little while ago —"I do love Max! I love him so much that I do not think there is anything I would not do to gain his love!"

"Have you anything to say against him?" she goes on, with ominous calm. "Is he not young, handsome, rich, and very much in love with me? Do not our estates lie side by side? Why," with a laugh, "if you

had cut out a husband on purpose for me, could you have made him in any way different? Esther, do not stand there, dumb as a mute. What have you to say against him?"

"One thing," I say at last; "and if it were the only one, it is all-sufficient. You do not care for him."

"Do I not? Who gave you leave to judge for me? I do like him. I like him thoroughly. Many people do not love their husbands with that sort of passionate, maudlin love one reads of, *before* they marry them" (lacing her fingers in and out, and looking at me again with a sort of hungry wistfulness for a confirmation she cannot, I know, find in my face), "but they grow to love them. It would be unnatural if one did not love any one who was always kind, always generous, always good-natured and pleasant to live with—most unnatural, would it not?"

Then, as I do not answer, "You have said yourself that he is good-natured and generous. You used to be fond of him; and if I must marry—and even you told me but the other day that I must—who, among all the men who have wanted to marry me, is better fitted to me, more desirable in every way?"

"My dear," I say, gently, finding my voice at last, "there is an old-fashioned formula in the Prayer-book, 'to love, honour, and obey.' Do you love Gerald Carrington? Do you honour him? Do you mean to obey

him? Or do you mean to be loved, to be honoured, to be obeyed by him."

"We have changed that," she says, laughing uneasily. "No women obey their husbands now-a-days."

"It seems to me that a woman should at least go through the form of *imagining* her husband to be superior to herself—before marriage," I answer, warmly. "Gerald is your inferior in every respect, and you know it. But that has little to do with it. If he were an archangel, I should still be sorry, most bitterly sorry, that you have promised to marry him."

She stands quite silent; she does not ask my meaning; but presently her lip begins to quiver like a child's who is disappointed, and she turns her head away.

"I have neither father nor mother," she says, with a tremble in her voice. "I am alone in the world but for you; and you, I thought, loved me. It is a little hard that you cannot wish me joy, or find one kind word to say to me."

I stretch out my hands tenderly, lovingly.

"Dear," I say, very low, "but three weeks ago you told me you loved another man. I cannot—God help you, my poor darling—I *cannot* so soon wish you joy of your marriage with this one."

I drop her hands and turn away. The tears are in my eyes, and running over; and if I cannot say any kind or pleasant things to her, at least I can abstain from

saying unpleasant ones, since now it is too late to do any good.

But I have not gone many steps, when she, running after me, lays a hand on my arm, detaining me.

"I will not ask you any more for your good wishes," she says, hurriedly; "but there is one thing I expect you to do for me."

"What is it?" (in some surprise).

"When people are going to be married," she begins, nervously, hesitatingly, "they always tell their friends and —relations, do not they?"

"Well?"

"Well, that is what I want you to do. Cannot you understand?"

I think that I do understand, too well. A suspicion that has been growing in my mind for some days past almost seems to receive confirmation. Is this why Gerald Carrington has fared better than the rest of Sylvia's lovers?

"If you want me to tell Lady Eleanor," I say, coldly, purposely misunderstanding her, "I must decline. She has a right to expect that you would tell her yourself."

"I am not thinking of Aunt Eleanor," she answers, impatiently, "but of Max. He must hear it before he goes; and *you* must tell him. One would look so stupid" (with a poor little pretence at a laugh) "announcing one's own marriage."

"He will, no doubt, hear it in good time. I cannot see that there is any hurry," I answer, quietly. "You might change your mind—such things do happen—and then we should be sorry——"

"There *is* a hurry," she interrupts, feverishly, imperiously. "He must hear it now—at once. He shall not go away without hearing it. If you can find no way to tell him, *I* will—of that you may be sure; but I think you will agree with me the news would come best from you."

I look at her gravely and sadly.

"I will tell him," I say, quietly.

And then I turn away from her, and go home.

* * * * * *

A few hours later I am again called upon for my congratulations.

I am alone in the drawing-room, waiting for dinner, when Gerald comes in. His handsome, boyish face is alight with passionate triumphant happiness. In his boundless good-will he includes even me, who have not been (so he thinks) on his side.

"Wish me joy, Miss Grey," he says, holding out both his hands to me. "I am the happiest fellow in the world."

I take his hands, and look into his radiant blue eyes.

"Tell me you are the happiest fellow in the world a year after you are married, and I will wish you joy," I

say, with a poor little attempt at jocularity, to cover the scantiness of my good wishes.

He drops my hands, disgusted—naturally. And yet, if he did but know it, I have no lack of good-will toward him; on the contrary, I could find it in my heart to cry over him for very pity.

Though the man that Sylvia *loved* and married might be—would be, I think—the happiest man in the world, yet the man that she marries and does not love, will be, I think, of all men most miserable.

Notwithstanding this inauspicious beginning, the dinner goes off gaily enough.

When two people are well pleased with each other, it matters very little what the third may say, or do, or think. Sylvia talks and laughs rather more than is usual with her, and it would take a very wet blanket indeed to damp Gerald's good spirits.

After dinner they go to the piano—Sylvia playing and singing, Gerald bending over her, and adoring her; and I take my chair and my work on to the terrace, where a little daylight still lingers.

And as I sit there I hear steps on the gravel, and, looking up, see Max coming towards me. My heart seems for a moment to stop beating; only one thought remains to me—he is here, and I must tell him. I think I must have relied more than I had thought on the chances which might prevent me from meeting him—

might prevent me from being the one to deal him so sore a wound, to feel such utter dismay at the sight of him.

"All alone, Esther?" he says, when he has greeted me.

"Two are company, and three are none," I answer, laughing nervously, but willing to pave the way to what I have to tell. "Sylvia and Gerald are in the drawing-room; but as they were only singing to each other, and looking at each other, I was not wanted."

His face darkens, and he is silent; but while I am plucking up my courage to speak again, he is before me.

"I am going to-morrow, and I have only a little time to stay," he says, shortly. "I will go in and say good-bye to them."

I ought to detain him. I ought to tell him *now*. I ought, but I cannot. I was always a coward—never a greater one than at this moment. He steps through the window into the room, and I follow him.

Sylvia is at the piano. Gerald is bending over her in an adoring attitude, and looking at her in a way which never until to-day would she have permitted—probably only permits now on the grounds that all engaged people are bound to make fools of themselves, it being part of the agreement; or, it may be, because she knows that Max is there, looking at them. If I fear that she, who

has never seen him since she heard the miserable story of Lucy Bowden, will show by her manner any resentful knowledge of it, I am mistaken.

She greets him with her brightest, coldest smile. She holds out one hand to him, playing carelessly on the keys with the other, with the pleasantest, emptiest words of welcome one can imagine.

His manner is by contrast bluff, curt, and cold. In the briefest words he tells her that he is going on the morrow, and that this is his good-bye.

"So soon?" she says, with a little pretence at reproachfulness. "We quite thought you meant to stay with us another three months; did not we, Esther?"

But I, not being a good hand at amateur acting, will not or cannot aid her. I have not a word to say. I can only stand looking sorrowfully from Max's dark, miserable face, to her cold bright one.

Presently Gerald fishing out a song from the remote depths of the music-stand, places it before her, with a great many entreaties that she will sing it; and she with a little polite apology to Max, yields and begins. It is a tender love song, and Gerald, naturally not unwilling to show off his triumph before the man whom he has justly or unjustly considered his rival, emphasizes every tender word with a look that is ten times tenderer.

What is worse, Sylvia, whose good taste has always rebelled against any open display of feelings, however

real—Sylvia, who has always remorselessly made game of the lovers who wear their hearts upon their faces, not only allows, but, as it seems to me, sometimes returns these looks with glances that are at once coquettish and provocative.

It is evident to me that before the song is finished Max's patience is pretty well at an end.

When another is on the point of beginning I can bear it no longer. I cross over, and under pretence of looking for something near the piano, manage to get near her.

"It is his last evening. Cannot you be a little kind?" I whisper, reproachfully. "You will be sorry afterwards."

She gives me a glance of defiance, and strikes the opening chords; and I, sick at heart, turn away and go out again through the open window on to the terrace.

Presently, Max joins me, pacing silently up and down by my side; and while I am casting about for such words as may best and kindliest break to him the news I have to give him, he, in a measure, saves me the trouble.

"Esther," he says, stopping suddenly in his walk, and looking down at me, "do you remember telling me that you knew, you were sure, Sylvia would not marry Carrington?"

"Yes, I remember."

"Well, would you say the same now?" he asks, hotly, eagerly. "Is that" (nodding his head in their direction) "only flirting, or is it *real*?"

"I could not say the same now," I answer, very slowly, very sorrowfully, "because—she is engaged to him."

After all I have not *broken* it to him. I have told it in blankest, barest fashion.

For a minute there is silence, a terrible minute in which I can divine, without looking at him, the struggle for fortitude in the brave and kindly heart.

"How long?" he asks presently.

"She only told me to-day," I answer, understanding him.

"Did she tell you to tell me?" he asks again.

"Yes" (looking up at him), "she told me to tell you."

Another silence, another cruel fight for mastery over himself, in which he, being true and strong of heart, comes out the conqueror, and then he speaks again.

"It is unreasonable of me to mind—most unreasonable; is it not?" he says, with a wretched smile. "What right have *I* to be jealous—I, who gave my life into another woman's keeping six years ago?"

Then, after a pause, he says more gently—

"I could have wished that she had married some one else—some one more worthy of her; but perhaps it is only that jealousy blinds me. Anyhow, tell her from

me—I cannot tell her myself before him—that all my best wishes go with her: that I pray most earnestly that 'all things goodly and glad remain with her—all things that make glad life and goodly death.'"

His face is white with a passionate intensity of feeling. I hold out my hand with a gesture of sympathy. I cannot speak—My poor Max!

"I will say good-bye to her now, and get it over," he says, drawing a long breath.

And he goes in, while I stand at the window trying to choke back the foolish, blinding tears wrung from my most bitter disappointment.

I cannot see him as he goes towards them, but I know that unless his face has altogether changed since he turned it from me, it must bear upon it some mark of the bitter pain at his heart.

Carrington, who is of a generous nature, volunteers—from real kindliness, I believe, however mistaken it may be—to walk with him across the park, and goes out into the hall to fetch his cigar-case.

In what exact fashion Max says the "good-bye" that is to last for so many years, I hardly know. . . . I only know that to the very last Sylvia's face is calm, and smiling, and friendly—nothing less, nothing more. And then Carrington calls out from the terrace that he is ready, and Max wrings my hand, mutters, "God bless you! take care of her!" and is gone.

"Could you not say one kind word to him—only one?" I cry, reproachfully, as the sound of their footsteps becomes fainter.

She comes forward a few paces, and looks vaguely and wildly at me, then stretches out her arms into the empty air with a most bitter cry—

"Max! Max! Come back! Come back!"

"Are you mad?" I cry, laying my hand on her arm. "Do you want them to hear you? What good can it do you if they *do* come back? What have you to say to Max before the man you have promised to marry?"

She turns her dazed, miserable eyes on me. She presses her poor little hands tight upon her heart as if in some way she might press out the pain there, and then, without another look or word, turns and goes falteringly, stumbling as she goes, as one who walks in some miserable dream, out of the room.

* * * * * *

A little while after, Gerald, coming back, finds me there alone; and at last, wearied by his entreaties, perplexed by his questions, I go at his request in search of Sylvia.

But as I pause outside her door, there comes to me the sound of such passionate, bitter weeping, such cruel, heart-breaking sobs, that I do not knock or speak to her.

I only kneel outside, and kissing the senseless wood

that shuts me out from my darling, pray God to help her in her agony.

Presently I go back to Gerald, and make such excuse as I can; but when at last he goes (very unwillingly) I know that already one drop of bitterness is mingled with the cup of happiness which only a few short hours ago he raised to his eager lips.

If Swinburne had said that *happiness* "can but last in us here at his height for a day and a night," there might be some truth in it. Happiness goes, but love remains—oftentimes longer than he is wanted.

PART III.

" Never morning wore
To evening, but some heart did break."

" Sweet is true love, tho' given in vain, in vain ;
And sweet is death, who puts an end to pain:
I know not which is sweeter—no, not I."

Part III.

CHAPTER IX.

It is May again. Not a May of bright suns, soft breezes, and budding flowers; but a May that brings the sharp and cutting winds, the night-frosts that ought to have bidden us farewell a month ago. Too soon we congratulated ourselves that the east wind—bitter enemy of man and beast—had passed us over in blessed forgetfulness; too soon we have cast aside the heavy garments of winter, and donned the gayer raiment of spring; too soon the buds and the fruit-blossoms, allured by the treacherous smiles of April, have unfolded their leaves and their petals to the warm sun kisses. *They* are hanging, drooping and blanched, on the boughs; *we* are forced to drag out the flowers that bloomed in our grates, and go back to blazing fires, to hang up our smart gowns in our wardrobes, and wrap ourselves up in seal-

skin and furs. Our English climate is apt to play us these little tricks.

And so it comes to pass that on this morning of which I write, towards the middle of the month, I am sitting before a bright fire in Sylvia's morning-room, with my work in my lap and my crewels in a gay-coloured heap on a little table by my side, instead of sunning myself out in the air, as I did last year.

Nine months have come and gone since Max went away, and have brought no startling changes, either for good or for ill to any of us. Changes there are, but they have been so gradual—so imperceptible in their coming—that it is only on looking back, or remembering what was, that we can realize them.

For six out of the nine we have been abroad, wandering hither and thither, seeking happiness and finding none; and all the time, or nearly all the time, Gerald Carrington has been following in our train. If the object of these wanderings, if the reason that we have never been allowed to rest, in however comfortable and pleasant a place, for more than a week at a time, has been (as I have sometimes suspected) the desire to be rid only for a little while of a companionship that day by day is growing a sorer tax on Sylvia's patience and strength—then they have failed; and partly because they have failed, partly because three months ago Sylvia came of age, and there were all manner of affairs waiting for her

to settle, we have, much to my relief, come home to rest awhile.

I have an Englishwoman's finnikin dislike for dirt; I have an Englishwoman's horror of obnoxious insects; and I have more, far more, than an ordinary Englishwoman's distrust of dishes of which I do not know the compounds—clearly, I am not cut out for travel.

While I sit here, lazily working an impossible sunflower that is straggling across a coarse tea-cloth, the latest form of art-needlework, the door opens and Gerald comes in.

Here is one of the changes of which I spoke—a change that could not have been wrought in a day, or a week, or a month, but that nine months have slowly but surely brought about. Gerald Carrington is no longer a good-looking, light-hearted boy; he is a grave, care-worn man. His laugh no longer rings gaily through the house; it comes but rarely, and then only at Sylvia's bidding. His blue eyes no longer dance with fun and good-humour. They light up occasionally, it is true, with a passionate gladness if Sylvia flings him but one kind word, but ordinarily they are dull and cloudy. And this is the work of nine months. Nine months of blind persistent fighting against a truth that has been forcing itself upon him, day by day, clearer and clearer. I think there can be *nothing* but bitterness now in the cup he thought so full of happiness such a little

while ago; but even yet he will not put it from his lips.

"Where is Sylvia?" is his first question, when he has bidden me "Good morning."

"In the library with Mr. Silverthorne," say I (meditating the while whether the stamens of a sunflower *can* be a dull olive-green).

"She is always with that old humbug," says Gerald, irritably, flinging himself into a chair. "When is that bothering business going to be done?"

He is often irritable now, poor boy, with me or with anyone but Sylvia; with her he is gentle and patient to a fault.

"Don't call him a humbug," I say, lightly; "I am very fond of Mr. Silverthorne. If it were not that there is already a Mrs. Silverthorne and half-a-dozen Miss Silverthornes, I think I should look after the situation."

But he refuses to smile at my little pleasantry. He sits moodily watching the fire.

"Miss Grey," he says, looking up suddenly, "when is there to be an end to this?"

"An end to the business?" I ask (purposely misunderstanding him). "Console yourself, Mr. Silverthorne leaves by the afternoon train."

"I do not mean the business," he answers fiercely, "and you know that I do not. Curse the business! I

wish she would fling all the money into the dirt. I mean, when is she going to marry me?"

"My dear boy," I say, laughing nervously, "ought not you to ask that question of *her?*"

"Ask it of her?" he cries, his handsome face white with passion. "Have I not asked it every day or nearly every day for the last six months, and have I not always got the same answer, 'In a little while'—'In a little while?' Do you know what I have sometimes thought? Will you believe that at times I have been almost *forced* to think that it can only be leading up to one thing—that at the last she means to throw me over."

He flings away his chair, and paces up and down the room with angry strides.

"God knows" he cries, with bitter vehemence, "how I have tried to be blind, tried *not* to understand. I have been deaf and dumb as well as blind and patient—always patient. But my patience is nearly at an end."

In truth he looks with his white set face, from which the boyish comeliness has altogether departed, like a man who will not easily be trifled with.

"When a man is going to be married, has he not a right to expect that the woman will show him some affection? She did like me once, say what you will, she did like me once; but since the day she promised to marry me—do you remember it? she has scarcely had

one kind word or look to give me. Esther," (standing over me and looking down at me with fierce blue eyes) "what is the meaning of it? How is it to end?"

"I am sure that she will marry you," I say at last, being compelled to say something, and sorely puzzled to know what is wisest, "if you wish it."

"*If I wish it.* Are you mad?" he cries, hotly. "Have I wished, or striven, or hoped for anything else since the day I first saw her?"

"My poor fellow," I say, presently, very kindly, very sorrowfully, "have not all these months convinced you that you and Sylvia are not suited to each other?"

"How can any man suit himself to her if I have not?" he cries, passionately. "Have I known any will but hers? Have I not laid myself down that she may trample over me? Tell me; what have I left undone that will please her, or make her happy?"

But I am silent. Is it any good telling him that I am sure, so sure that nothing he could do, or leave undone, could ever make any difference?

"Tell me," he urges, imperiously.

"Where is the good," I ask sadly, lifting my eyes to his face. "If I were to tell you that the only chance of happiness for her, and for yourself, would be to *give her up*, would you do it?"

For a moment he is silent. And I cannot tell how he would answer me, in what manner he would take my unpalatable advice; for at the end of that moment the door opens and Sylvia comes in.

"Oh, Esther," she begins, eagerly, then breaks off. "You here?" she says coldly, putting out her hand to Gerald.

Here is another of the changes that these nine months, quiet and uneventful as they have seemed, have brought about.

It would be difficult to say where and how Sylvia is so changed. She is a good deal paler and a great deal thinner, it is true; but that is not all. She seems to have lost all life and colour. The Sylvia that is before us to-day is but a poor spiritless copy of the Sylvia who awhile ago could count her lovers by the dozen. Nine months' endurance, not always a patient endurance I know (and yet I believe she has struggled harder to be patient than we can understand) of a lovemaking that is distasteful to her; nine months of the daily, almost hourly presence of the man with whom she has rashly and unwisely promised to spend the rest of her life, have wrought this havoc in her beauty; and, alas! not only in her beauty but in her temper also. She who was always so kind and so gentle, so loving and considerate, is often irritable and impatient now, and I believe that the strain upon her—being forced to seem

that which she is not, being unable to seem that which she is—is often almost beyond her endurance. In the mornings, her eyes have the worn and heavy look of one who has watched, and not slept through the sorrowful hours of the night. All day long she seems afraid to rest, since rest means thought.

"You do not seem overjoyed to see me?" says the young man, taking her hand and trying to look into her eyes, which avoid his.

"How can I be," she says, coldly, withdrawing her hand, "when you are here morning, noon, and night. If you want us to pine for your company, you should give us a little less of it; should not he, Esther?"

"Absence is supposed to make the heart grow fonder, certainly," say I, holding my work at a respectful distance, and looking at it with one eye shut to see if by any chance it may look like a flower in that way.

"And yet," he says, shortening the distance she has put between them, his face darkening ominously, "you propose to spend the rest of your life, every day and all day long in my company. If it is so distasteful to you do not you think it is a poor look out for you?"

"Heaven tempers the wind to the shorn lamb," says Sylvia, laughing uneasily. "Even a husband cannot be *always* with his wife."

But I suppose there is a limit to every man's patience, and that Gerald has come to the end of his.

I have assisted at a good many quarrels between them, but there is an indefinable change in his manner and face which makes it evident to me that this is to be in some way unlike its predecessors. Always before he has seemed *afraid* of her and of going too far; now he seems to have cast out fear.

I begin to gather my wools together and to think about escape.

"Sylvia," he says suddenly, seizing her hands and compelling her to look at him, while a passion of anger and love war together in his white face, "what induced you to promise to marry me?"

Her eyes droop before his angry ones, and she is silent.

"It is not altogether an unreasonable question," he says, with a sternness that is by no means unbecoming to him, "and I want an answer."

"What induces anybody to promise to marry anybody?" she asks, trying to draw her hands away from him, trying to laugh and failing in both.

"Some women marry for money, or because any husband is better than none; but neither motive could have been yours, who have plenty of money, plenty of lovers," he says, sternly. "Tell me what it was. Of one thing I am sure" (with most bitter emphasis) "it was not *love*."

She wrenches her hands from his, and clasping them together looks piteously at him.

"What have I done? How have I offended you?" she cries, wildly. "Heaven knows, I have always tried to do my best."

"If that is your best," he says, with a miserable laugh, "what must your *worst* be?"

There is a minute's silence, and I, unnoticed by either of them, make my way to the door. Only a few words come to me between the opening and shutting of it.

"Gerald," says Sylvia, in a shaken voice, "I have not been myself lately. If I have been impatient and irritable, bear with me a little—I—I do not know what is the matter with me."

I hear no more. I close the door gently and leave them to themselves. Whatever may be the issue, it lies between them alone; and though I am sure that it must be better, far better for *both* of them, that an engagement in which there is no love on one side, and can be no happiness on either, should be broken now, rather than end in a miserable marriage, yet I cannot interfere between them.

* * * * * *

Half-an-hour later I, watching from my window, see Gerald go across the park, and it is easy to tell from the way he walks, with down-bent head and rapid strides, how it has fared with him.

Presently I go in search of Sylvia.

I find her on the sofa, with her head buried in her outstretched arms, her whole form shaken by sobs.

"My darling," I say gently, laying my hand on her, "tell me what is the matter."

She throws her arms about my neck, and buries her damp face upon my breast.

"Oh, Esther," she sobs; "he is gone, and I have broken his heart."

"My dear," I say soothingly, stroking the pretty ruffled head that lies upon my gown, "you must not cry so; you are not strong—you will make yourself ill; try to be quiet, and tell me all about it."

She does try, she makes a pitiful effort, but she is more feeble and worn than I have thought, and she cannot stop the sobs that shake her from head to foot.

"He gave me up. I would have married him. I would have kept to my word—indeed, indeed, I would; but he gave me up. He knew at last that I did not love him, and he would not have me; but all the same, I have broken his heart."

"He will get over it," I say, reassuringly. "Can you not see that it is better for him to find it out *now* than after you were married to him. Have you not tried your best to like him and be good to him now? Do you think it would have been any easier when he was your husband?"

She shivers and clings closer to me.

"Esther," she says, presently, "I want to tell you—I have wanted to tell you for a long time—that you were right, and I was wrong, most wrong. I think I must have been mad with misery and jealousy when I promised to marry him; but indeed, indeed, I meant to be good to him. I liked him so much and I thought it would be so easy to like him a little more; but every day it seemed to grow harder and harder. Do you know, can you guess" (lifting her wet, sad eyes to mine) "how miserable I have been all these months?"

The tears are in my eyes too, but I cannot speak. I can only hold her tighter to me, my poor darling!

For a little while she lies quietly in my arms, but presently she speaks again.

"Do you remember that last night—Max's last night? Do you remember what you said? Oh! Esther! Esther! if you had known how your words would ring in my ears, and reproach me and haunt me, you would not have spoken them,—'You will be sorry afterwards,' 'You will be sorry afterwards.' Oh! how sorry! how sorry!"

She falls to bitter weeping again, and it is long before I can soothe or scold her into quietness; and when at last I lay her, worn out, upon the sofa, it goes to my heart with a new and terrible fear to see how white and weak she looks.

And as I sit and watch her, there comes to me suddenly, without any conscious exercise of thought, the picture of

a beautiful woman lying dead, with white flowers, no whiter than her face, scattered all around her, and I know that Sylvia lying there with eyes closed has brought the picture to my remembrance.

* * * * * *

For all the next day, and the day after, she goes about wearily and sadly, and her eyes are often heavy with tears; but on the next there comes a letter from Gerald—a kind and a generous one, I know—in which he frees her from all blame, and with an assumption of cheerfulness that does him credit, tells her that he is going away for awhile, until he can learn to meet her only as a friend; and though she cries plentiful tears over the letter, yet it lifts a heavy weight, I am sure, from her heart, and the sense of freedom from a thraldom that of late has been too heavy to bear, produces a reaction that makes her almost light-hearted again.

That same evening it is evident to me while Pritchard (Sylvia's maid) is dressing my somewhat scanty locks for dinner, that she is primed with some piece of news or gossip, which she is longing to fire off.

It is one of Sylvia's grievances that I will not indulge (at her expense) in all the luxuries to which she is naturally accustomed—a lady's maid being one of them. I am therefore condemned, as a sort of compromise, to accept part of Pritchard's services, and to be told on an

average twice a week that my "'air is certainly getting very thin."

It is some consolation to her, if not to me, that I am not altogether so devoid of curiosity as her mistress; and that I occasionally show some interest in the small pieces of village news she culls for my benefit. She little knows how much interest I take in what she tells me to-night.

"Do you remember a young person of the name of Lucy Bowden, m'm?" she begins, clearing her throat. "A young person about whom there was some talk some years ago?"

"I remember her," I say, quietly, conscious that my face in the glass looks suddenly redder; but Pritchard, who has on her primmest look (she disapproves of young persons in general, and, I am certain from her manner, of this young person in particular) does not notice me.

"She has run away, ma'am, and her father is mad about it, they say," says Pritchard, with gusto.

"Run away!" I cry, wrenching my hair out of her hands, and turning to face her. "Run away! What do you mean?"

Pritchard regards me with a stare of stony astonishment, as well she may; and I awake to the fact that my manner is extraordinarily excited.

"What a strange story!" I say, laughing, and trying to tone it down. "Where has she run to?"

But Pritchard waits until she has recovered possession of my head, and then goes on:

"It seems there was a young man, a sort of cousin, she was very sweet upon years ago, and her father wouldn't let her have anything to say to him, and he got into some sort of trouble, and went off to America. They say that old Bowden wanted her to marry a gentleman, and that there was someone—pretty sort of gentleman, I should think," she puts in with a sneer—"that she was waiting for all these years. Anyhow, she has gone off with the cousin now."

"Has she married him?" I ask, and I try hard to ask it indifferently—I, who know that Max's whole future depends on it.

"Yes, ma'am. She left a letter to her father to say so, and he has been mad-like, going about the village cursing and raving ever since—though it was partly his own fault."

"Indeed?" (I think that "indeed" was well done.)

"Yes, ma'am. He found out that the young man was come back, and that Lucy was meeting him again; the neighbours told him, and he came home half drunk—if you will excuse my saying so, ma'am—and he *beat* her."

"Poor girl!" I say involuntarily.

"And the next morning when he got up, she was gone. That's what comes of bringing up girls above

their station. There, ma'am, I think that will do" (pushing in a hairpin and pointing out the moral of her story at one and the same time).

"Quite well, thank you. You had better go to your mistress now," say I, glad to be rid of her; and she goes. If she could but look through the closed door, would she not think I had gone mad?

I pace up and down. I clasp my hands with joy. I think I almost *cry* with joy.

"Max is free! Max is free!" I say over and over again to myself, as if the words were too good to be true, and the mere reiteration of them might make them real.

At dinner-time I am divided between a desire to hide the fact that I am in unusually, and apparently causelessly, good spirits, and an equally strong desire to find out whether Pritchard has told her story to Sylvia as well as to me. She is grave, and very thoughtful, but not, it seems to me, so sad as she has been of late; but beyond that I discover nothing.

* * * * * *

We are sitting in Sylvia's little room after dinner—I with my work, Sylvia with her hands lying idle in her lap, her eyes thoughtfully watching the fire—when the door opens, and Morris, the stout and silver-haired butler, comes in.

"If you please, ma'am," he says, in as unmoved

a tone as though he were announcing dinner, "a messenger has come from the Abbey to say they would be glad if you would go at once. Lady Eleanor is not expected to live through the night."

Sylvia starts to her feet, and turns pale. The sudden presence of Death among us is always startling, even though he comes but to the old and feeble.

"Who brought the message?" she asks quickly.

"The young man, Timothy, ma'am," says Morris, grandly.

The young man Timothy is ordered into our presence, but between fear of Sylvia and irrepressible tears (I believe he must have been fond of his proud old mistress) we get little out of him, but that little is to me pregnant with meaning.

"My Lady had been better the last few days"—(she had a stroke of paralysis in the autumn, from which she had partially recovered), "and he" (Tim) "had been wheeling her in a chaise that very afternoon about the grounds. A man named Bowden—Sir Charles Grahame's bailiff,"—Tim explains (as if we were not too familiar with the name) "had come up in the avenue and spoken to her. After the first few words, my Lady had ordered him, Tim, out of hearing, and he had not heard what passed; but when Bowden had gone, my Lady had ordered him to wheel her back to the house, and looked very white and angry. An hour, or it might be only

half-an-hour after, the other servant had found her lying dead-like in her chair, and the doctor said it was another stroke, and she couldn't live many hours." Here Tim shows symptoms of breaking out again, and is ordered out, while we make ready to go as quickly as we can to the Abbey.

"Sylvia," I ask, as we drive silently side by side as fast as the fastest horses can carry us through the quiet country lanes, "did Pritchard tell you a story she had heard about Lucy Bowden?"

"She told me some gossip," says Sylvia, turning her head away, and looking out of the window.

"I do not think it is gossip only, I think it is *true*," I answer.

"It is to be hoped so, for the credit of the family," she says, coldly.

"And I think," I continue, not noticing her, "that Bowden finding there was no longer any good to be got by holding his tongue, must have taken the satisfaction of letting my Lady know how great a risk she had run of being connected with him. It was a poor one, no doubt; but still it may have been an irresistible one to a man like him."

"Will you be so kind as not to talk of them, Esther," says Sylvia. turning angrily on me. "I hate their very name. If what you say be true, then it has killed Aunt Eleanor, and no wonder."

All through the night I sit waiting and shivering in a cold ante-room, ready to go into the sick-room if I should be wanted. But in the grey dawn of the morning Sylvia comes out with a face that is grey too. "She is dead," she says, quietly, and then bursts into tears.

And I take her hands and lead her away, and we leave the poor proud old woman there alone—prouder and colder than ever she must look with the awful majesty of Death on her stern, handsome face—and go home. And as we drive through the familiar roads that look so strange in the first faint light of day, we are very silent. Sylvia lies back with her eyes closed, and looks worn and very white, and I sit thinking of Lady Eleanor *dead*, and trying to realize the thought that is so awful—whenever and however Death comes amongst us—that she who was such a little while ago living, breathing, talking, sleeping, a human creature like ourselves, is now somewhere else, something else. Who can tell where? Who can tell what?

"She died very quietly," says Sylvia, presently, in the *hushed* voice with which we speak of those who are but just dead. "She seemed in a sort of heavy sleep. She died so——"

"Did she not speak, or say anything?" I ask.

Lady Eleanor's words were often wearisome enough to me while she lived, poor soul. How is it that we

note so anxiously the *last* words of any living creature—hero or criminal, friend or foe?

"She spoke many times, but it was hard to make out what she said. Only once, just before she died, she opened her eyes, and said quite clearly, 'Tell Max I never believed it. Tell Max I never believed it.'"

And Sylvia bursts out crying again.

She is tender-hearted, and she is worn and weary with her long hours of watching. But I know that when the first shock is overpast, she cannot grieve very long or very deeply for an old woman who never tried to win love while she lived, and cannot therefore be held in very tender and regretful remembrance after her death.

And though I feel that there is something intensely sad, intensely pitiful in such a lonely, loveless death, yet with my sadness, overriding it, overmastering it, comes, with a sense of gladness of which I am ashamed, one ever recurrent thought, "Max will come home; Max must come home now."

CHAPTER X.

BUT Max has not come.

Spring has ripened into summer, and summer is growing old. June and July have passed away, and all day long a fierce August sun, like a ball of fire in a sky of unbroken blue, is beating down on the heads of the toilers among the ripened corn, is baking and browning the grass that awhile ago was so fresh and green, is reddening the cheeks of the peaches on the walls, of the apples on the trees; and yet he has not come.

For many days and weeks I went about saying to myself, "He must come soon, and when he comes all will be right," but when weeks passed into months, hope grew fainter and fainter; and I am almost ready to cry despairingly "He will never come now."

It has been a trying summer to us all—a summer of hot suns and unhealthy droughts. All day long we have

gone wearifully gasping for air and praying for the night that may bring us a breath of wind, but when night comes even such faint breezes as it does send seem tainted and heated by passing over the sun-baked earth.

It is late afternoon, and the sun is sinking at last in a glory of golden clouds. How glad we are to bid him "good-night," we, who in winter welcome so joyously the faintest tokens of his royal presence—we, who if we be rich and luxurious, go so many hundreds of miles to follow him southwards. I, sitting on the lawn, wave my big fan of palm-leaves and look as anxiously above my head for the smallest cloud that may to the eye of faith betoken rain, blessed cooling reviving rain, as ever the ancient mariner looked for a sail, but there is none.

And as I look earthward again, I see Sylvia with her hat in her hand and a big parasol held carelessly above her uncovered head, coming towards me.

It goes to my heart to note how *tiredly* she walks, how white and weary she looks. The summer has brought no gladness or brightness to her. She never complains, it is true; she is always content and very gentle. But to me, who can remember the perfect joyousness, the gladness in mere life that once seemed to show itself in her every movement and look, it is terrible to see the patient hopelessness of look and attitude, and more pitiful than any complaint.

Truly those of her detractors who were wont to say, failing any other fault in her, that the noble figure which dwarfed their own into insignificance would as she grew older be of too grand proportions, would scarcely say so now.

"It is too warm for you to be walking," I say, rising hastily, and putting my hand on her slender arm; "come and sit down."

"Esther," she says, gravely, looking at me, but not in any way noticing my request, "do you know they have got the fever at Lyndhurst?"

"At *Lyndhurst?*" I ask astonished, only thinking for the moment of the Abbey, where Tim and his old mother are the only people left in charge, and spend their lives in a hopeless but loyal endeavour to keep the rust, and moths, and rats at bay.

"Yes; in the village; in the cottages."

"How did you hear it? You have not been there?" I ask, with a sudden spasm of utter sickening fear at my heart.

"I met the doctor, Mr. Jeffries, at the lodge—there is another little baby there, Pritchard told me this morning—and I went to see the woman. Esther" (laying her hand on my arm and looking at me with eyes that thrill with an infinite pity), "do you know that already one little child is dead of it? She was the *only* child of her mother, and she is half-mad they say, and all day and

all night she lays her head on the child's pillow, beside the little dead head, praying that God may let her take the fever and die too. It seems strange, does it not, that God should take her *one* little child, when other mothers have so many, and perhaps do not care much for them. It must seem hard to her, very hard" (looking beyond me and speaking as if she were thinking aloud) "to understand what God means."

"Poor soul! poor soul!" I say, sorrowfully, with the tears gathering in my eyes.

I never can bear to hear of little children dying. To those to whom the burden of life has grown over-heavy, death may come with a friendly hand, beckoning gently, saying "Come with me, I will give you rest;" but that the little ones to whom God has so lately given the life that is to them so good and joyous a thing, should be taken from the mother-arms that ache and weary and hunger for them, with a hunger that never can be satisfied, that is a mystery that I can never understand, which only God Himself some day may make clear to us.

"There are many others ill, and Mr. Jeffries says that he is afraid they will have a bad time of it," Sylvia goes on. (There are no tears in *her* eyes, yet something in them reminds me as I look at them "that the eyes that cannot weep, are the saddest eyes of all.")

"Poor things! poor things!" I say, pitifully.

There is not much diversity in my remarks, but when

the heart is full, I do not, for my own part, think the tongue speaks very eloquently.

"Esther," she says presently, laying her hand on my arm with a grasp that is almost painful, and looking at me with great tearless eyes, "do you know *why* the fever has come to those cottages?"

I shake my head.

"Because" (in a voice that loses its calmness and grows higher and higher with excitement) "they are badly drained—to speak rightly, are not drained at all—and badly ventilated, because the wretched roofs let in the sun and the rains, and the wretched windows keep in the foul smells, and don't let in the fresh air, because" (throwing up her arms with a bitter cry) "they are not fit for *pigs* to live in, while human creatures live and *die* in them."

"My dear," I say soothingly, "this is not the only place where the fever has come this summer. The people are dying of it at Brocklehurst. It is God's visitation."

But she does not hear or heed me.

"They are Max's cottages. They are Max's people," she cries passionately, throwing herself on the grass, and hiding her face in her hands. "Oh, Esther, Esther, why does he not come home?"

It is the first time she has in any way alluded to his long absence. I know that she wrote to him after Lady Eleanor's death, being obliged to tell him of it,

and of her last words to him; but I fear from the one short answer she received from him—a formal and reserved one—that she must have been afraid of making her letter too kind, and did not in any way show that she wished or looked for his return.

"My dear," I say, seating myself beside her, "if Max were at home, what could he do? He has no money."

She lifts her weary eyes, and looks around her with a shuddering and distasteful glance at the well-kept pleasure-grounds, the acres of smooth grass, and grand old trees—all the setting of but one lordly house, and all hers—only hers.

"Is it not horrible?" she says, with a quivering sigh; "is it not a crying shame? Look at the money that is wasted here—thrown into the dirt—all for the pleasure of one poor girl, to whom it cannot give one day of happiness, while just outside my gates these people are dying for want of it. Think of Mr. Silverthorne writing to me week after week for approval of some investment for money that is lying idle—*lying idle*—and I may not spend it on them."

"My dearest child," I say, soothingly, "you have spent it on them. You have given them food and wine, beds and clothing. Short of pulling down the cottages, you have done all you could do."

"And that is the one thing—the only thing—which could do any good," she says, despairingly.

"And as they are Max's cottages, not yours, I do not see that you can blame yourself," I urge, reassuringly.

"And because the money is mine, and not Max's, these people must die," she says, bitterly.

And seeing that she will not be persuaded or comforted, I hold my peace. But all that evening she is very grave and sad.

CHAPTER XI.

THE next morning I, slipping away as soon as I can, choose my shadiest hat, my biggest umbrella, and start off alone to the Lyndhurst cottages.

My one desire is to elude Sylvia. My greatest fear is that she may find out where I am going, and insist on coming with me. I hardly know why I have so great a dread of her going among these fever-stricken people, but it may be that my fear has in it something of foreboding—

> "Often do the spirits
> Of great events stride on before the events,
> And in to-day already walks to-morrow."

I do not even choose the path through the woods—it is the longest, and I do not want to be away too long. I plod wearily and hotly along the dusty, sun-baked

road, creeping along under the hedges wherever they cast one scrap of shade.

I have marked with a lighter heart my first milestone; I have told myself, with a praiseworthy attempt to keep up my own courage, that there is only another mile and a half before me, when the sound of wheels behind me makes me hastily turn my head, and Sylvia's pony-carriage, drawing up suddenly behind me, powders me plentifully with white dust.

"So you thought you had stolen a march upon me, Esther," she says, with a grave smile. "It is a pity you did not tell me where you were going; I could have saved you a hot walk. Jump in."

I lay my hand imploringly on her arm.

"Sylvia, you will not go into those cottages—promise me you will not. If you have no pity on yourself, have pity on me. You are not strong—you will take the fever!"

"Esther, are you turning *coward?*" she answers, looking at me steadily. "Do you think my life is so much more valuable than these poor people's, or than yours? Will you get in?"

For a minute I stand hesitating. The ponies are flicking the flies off with their tails. Sylvia is impatiently handling her whip. Charles, who has been brought up to think that the whole duty of man lies in an unmoved demeanour, is standing at the ponies' heads,

looking at me with impassive astonishment. It is out of the reach of his experience that gentlefolks should have emotions—and show them.

"If you will not come, I must go without you," says Sylvia.

And so, sorely against the grain, I go with her; and all the while my heart is beating with a great fear, to which, as yet, I will give no name. Even then I know that it is only the beginning of the end. Even then I think I am in some sort prepared for what is coming.

* * * * * *

All through that close and weary day we go from one cottage to another, tending and feeding as best we can the stricken people. Out of five-and-twenty families, a dozen or so poor creatures lie ill. Many of them—those who are ill, and those who have friends ill—take it with a stolid indifference peculiar to the very poor, who have, I think, suffered so much that neither death nor life—which is sometimes a harder thing than death—matters much to them.

"The drains was good enough for our grandfeythers and grandmothers," says one old woman whose daughter lies sick unto death; "I can't see that they bean't good enough for we. My feyther lived till ninety year—forty of 'em in this cottage, and I reckon it'll serve my time."

But there are others who, like wounded animals, turn

at bay, and shower hard words out of the bitterness of their poor hearts, even on us, who have come to succour them.

"Ye've come too late," says one man, turning from the wife who lies with the pallor of death on her poor thin face in a little room about eight feet square, whose ceiling I can touch with my hand. "Yes, she's dying. Yer wine can't do her much good now. Sorry? Ye bain't sorry! Yer dumb animals is better fed and lodged than we. Leave her alone—she's better off, may be. She never had much to thank the Almighty for in this world; mayhap He'll give her something better in t'other one."

Once, watching my opportunity, I slip out, and following the doctor, who has been going unweariedly among these poor folk all day, lay my hand on his arm to detain him.

"Is the fever *catching?*" I ask, looking anxiously in his cold, quiet face.

"My dear lady," he answers, with a sort of scorn, "if you have any fear you ought not to come here. It is a low form of typhoid, and though I do not myself consider that one person can take it from another, yet there can be no doubt that the same cause which is giving it to these people—some bad smell that the hot weather and the drought have brought from the bad drainage—might give it to you if you expose yourself to

it. Coming from the fresh air, and shutting yourself up in these close rooms you would be more especially liable to it."

I turn away. I forget to thank him for his opinion, clearly and candidly given. I do not even tell him it is not for myself that I fear. I have heard enough.

"Esther, do not be angry with me for going," says Sylvia that night, laying her tired white face caressingly against mine. "It makes me happier to do something for them."

Angry with her! I only hold her tight in my arms for a moment as I bid her "Good-night." I do not try to dissuade her any more. I think I have almost something of the Eastern fatalist feeling, "What will be, will be."

* * * * * *

For many sad and terrible days—more than I care to count—we go about among the cottages, tending the sick, comforting as best we can the broken-hearted, and helping those that are alive to bury their dead; but even yet the fever does not slack its fury, it only seems to lose one victim to lay its fatal grasp upon another.

And each day it seems to me that Sylvia grows a little paler, a little more weary; and I am sure that it is only her resolute courage that can hide how the effort to keep up her flagging strength grows greater day by day.

And it comes to pass that one day, towards evening,

I, seeking her, find her in a little cottage that stands apart from all the rest. The woman who lives in it stands apart also, shut out from the sympathies even of the other villagers, under a social ban. She has one little child—her shame and her glory—a little golden-haired creature, with such pretty joyous ways and so sweet a face that Sylvia and I have often admired and wondered at her, likening her to a sunbeam in a dark place.

Do you think the mother loves this little child any the less that she is the only thing that belongs to her in the whole pitiless world? Well, whatever were her sins—God knows, not I—she is punished enough now! The little golden head with which she used to play so lovingly, thinking perhaps (poor soul!), "God cannot be cruel, like men and women, since He has given me this," lies prone and helpless in Sylvia's arms; the little hands, awhile ago so fat and chubby, that used to clasp themselves so lovingly around the poor woman's desolate heart, lie feeble in Sylvia's warm clasp; the sweet eyes, that used to dance with so joyous a light, look dimly, dully up into Sylvia's lovely pitiful face.—Into *Sylvia's*, not into her mother's. God has been merciful, and the mother lies moaning, unconscious of her desolation, in the inner room.

As I open the cottage door a ray of sunset streams on Sylvia and the child in her arms, lighting up the little head with a golden glory.

"Hush!" says Sylvia, very low, lifting her hand. "She is dying."

And kneeling by her side, and looking tenderly and reverently in the little face I know that it is so. Soon, very soon, she will be one of God's little angels.

And as we look and watch, the eyes that are growing dimmer and dimmer lift themselves once more, the little feeble voice says faintly, so faintly that I cannot hear it, "Sing." But Sylvia understands.

With broken, quavering voice, with the tears rolling silently down her white cheeks, she obeys:—

"There is a happy land,
Far, far away.
Where saints in glory stand,
Bright, bright as day."

But before the song is done, the little one draws one long sighing breath, and we, looking into the child-face with a great awe, know that even as we look the Great Angel has gathered her in His arms, and taken her away from us to the "happy land."

"God bless her!" says Sylvia, tenderly and reverently, laying her lips on the little white face, and then bursts into passionate weeping.

That night she cannot, in spite of the knowledge of my anxious eyes upon her, eat one mouthful of dinner. She lies on the sofa dozing heavily, and muttering in her sleep.

"I am only tired, so tired," she says, when I rouse her up and put her to bed as though she were a little child again. "I shall be all right in the morning."

But when morning comes she cannot, in spite of all her efforts, raise her head, or stand upright.

Without her knowledge I send for Mr. Jeffries, and when he has seen her I follow him out of the room.

"It is the fever?" I say, quite quietly, lifting my hopeless eyes to his face.

"Yes, it is the fever," he answers, turning away, and avoiding my look.

CHAPTER XII.

For seven days and seven nights has my darling lain sick of the fever. For seven days and seven nights have I watched beside her, neither sleeping nor taking rest, and on the morning of the eighth day the two great doctors, whom at the very first I summoned from town, leave the sick room and go to take counsel together, while I wait apart for their verdict.

After awhile, I cannot tell how long, the greatest one of the two comes to me.

Friends, have you ever asked for the one nearest and dearest to you in all the world, the question which hangs on my parched white lips now?

"*Is there any hope?*"

The voice does not seem mine, yet it is I who speak, I who look into the quiet, grave face of the man who, for the moment, seems to represent God holding my

darling's fate in His hands, I who wait for one minute, that seems to hold a greater agony than brain and heart can bear, for his answer.

He lowers his eyes and looks down on to the carpet, and his words seem to come very slowly. I suppose that even when you are used to it, it is hard to deal a death-blow. But I think I hardly hear what he says. I think I knew it before it came. I only turn away my face from him, with the instinct to hide my pain.

"When the patient is young it is always wrong to say there is *no* hope," he begins, hesitatingly. "There are cases in which people have recovered when all the doctors have given them up."

"Then you do give her up?" I ask, in a shrill, sharp voice of extremest agony, turning round on him.

"The symptoms are very bad," he answers, and this time it is he who turns away from me. "If the young lady has any friends besides yourself, I should advise your sending for them at once."

That is all—is it not enough?

"Thank you," I say presently, in a dull, quiet way, conscious that he is waiting for me to say something. "She has one cousin, and I telegraphed for him at the very first. She has no one—no one else in all the world belonging to her but me." And then he goes, and in a little while I go back to Sylvia.

Towards evening her eyes, that all day have been

wandering and half-unconscious, or closed in a heavy lethargy, open and fix themselves on me. She makes a sign with her hand, already so feeble, and I go to her side and bend over her.

"Esther, am I very ill?" she says faintly, and yet quite consciously.

"Very ill, darling," I answer, quietly. I may not cry; over and over again I tell myself that I must not dare to cry.

"Am I *dying?*" (fixing her eyes, in which the cruel fever has lit so bright a fire, on my face).

"My dear, we cannot tell. God knows."

It is all that I can say. Even for those few words I have to fight hard to command my voice.

She is silent for a long time. The heavy eyelids droop over her lovely weary eyes, and I fancy she has fallen asleep; but as I kneel there waiting and watching, I see slow tears gathering on her dark curled lashes, and trickling down her wasted cheeks. I wipe them silently away. I am dumb. I, who ought to be able to find some words to comfort her.

"I am very young to die," she says, presently, in her feeble, shaken voice. "A little while ago I thought I *wanted* to die; but now I do not want to. I should like to live a little longer."

"Please God, you may, darling," I say, with a sob which I cannot control. "He can make you well even now."

Silence again, a long long silence. She does not cry any more, she only turns her face away from me. Perhaps she is too weary, too feeble to feel that anything, even death, matters very much. I fancy that they who have great horror and fear of death may console themselves in this, that the illness which he mostly sends as his forerunner so dulls the powers of feeling or of suffering that even the sense of his awful approach can cause no great fear. It is not as though with all faculties and powers in full strength one should be compelled to stand waiting with nerves strung to endurance and say, "He is coming."

And Sylvia was always brave and strong of heart. If she has any great fear now she does not show it, even to me.

She lies quite still, she seems to be thinking.

"If you are sure, quite sure, that it is *true*," she says presently, and every word comes so slowly, so weakly, that I have to stoop my head to hear them, "I should like you to send for Max."

And when I tell her that I have already sent for him she smiles and looks almost happy.

"How soon can he be here; will he come in time?" she asks, in her eager whisper. "Oh, Esther, Esther, let him come before I die; I must see him once more. I parted from him unkindly; I could not bear to die, and let him think me so always."

And when I soothe her and caress her, telling her that her best chance lies in perfect quietude, and that I hope and pray that he may be here soon, *very* soon, she smiles again, and obeys me like a little child.

* * * * * *

That night the fever seems less, and in the grey dawn of morning I, looking in Mr. Jeffries' grave face, try to read there one ray of the hope that has in spite of all assurances been growing up in my heart.

But I see very little.

"The fever is certainly less, but she has no strength; the weakness is the great danger now. She had worn herself out before she took the fever. If Captain Lyndhurst is coming, I hope that he will come soon."

That is all he will say. I suppose that he is too honest to give me hope that he does not possess himself.

And all that day it seems indeed as if her feeble strength could hold out but little longer, as if each faint and quivering breath might be the last; and yet, though she never speaks, her eyes are quite conscious, and often, very often, they wander to the door, and always they have a watchful look as if she were *listening*.

Almost I think she cannot die until Max comes, as if the great wish to see him were keeping her here.

And towards evening she falls asleep, and I, watching in the twilight, must, I fancy, in my utter weariness have dozed too, for I rouse up to find Pritchard standing by my side and whispering to me.

I start to my feet, and leaving her in my place go out. Outside the door I pause trembling. Max is here, and I must go and see him.

For a moment the light in the room where he is waiting seems to blind me. I go towards him, holding out my hand in dumb greeting; but as my eyes grow clearer I see in his face the question he cannot ask.

"Yes, she is alive," I answer, in the dull quiet way that seems the only way I can speak now. "But—she is dying. They do not think she can live many hours."

I ought to have broken it to him more gently, but I am half-dazed, and my brain is, I think, numbed with want of rest and the awful strain of ceaseless watching in alternate hope and despair.

He turns away and throws himself on the sofa, and buries his face in his arms.

I remember then that he has probably been travelling night and day; probably been *hoping* all the time, and that I have been cruel in my abruptness. I kneel by him, and try to draw away his hands.

"Max, do not; I cannot bear it," I say, feeling with

a strange dismay even then that my hands are wet with his tears—a man's tears, that are so much crueller and bitterer than a woman's. "She wants you so. Will you not come to her?"

He raises his face. How desperately weary and miserable he looks; how old and changed!

"Could you not have taken better care of her than that?" he says, fiercely dashing away the drops from his eyes. "Why did you not send for me before? I forgot" (most bitterly) "it is not my place to be with her. Where is Carrington? What has *he* been doing to let her take this fever?"

I do not try to excuse myself. I know that in his place I should have felt the same—that if *I* had been there I must in some way have prevented it.

"Carrington?" I say, confusedly, answering only his last words. "Did you not know? Has no one told you? Her engagement was broken off months ago. It is not he she wants, but *you*."

"Esther ——," he cries, seizing my hands and looking in my face with a sort of fear, "are you raving? Has misery turned your brain? Do you not know that I have been waiting to come home all these months because I expected to hear of her marriage every day? Do you not know that I am *free*, and that if I had known——"

He breaks off there. He *remembers*. Perhaps

something in my face reminds him. What good is his freedom now that she is *dying?*

Then I tell him—is there any harm, now that they have so little time left together?—how she has loved him all the time, and him only; how she has grieved and fretted, thinking of the coldness of their parting; and how the very last words she has spoken to me were to ask for *him.* And when I tell him that he turns away again and hides his face from me, and I know that it is more than he can bear.

In a little while I go back to Sylvia, to prepare her, if I can, for his coming. Pritchard meets me at the door.

"She has been asking for you, ma'am," she says in a subdued voice, and I can see that her eyes are red with crying. "Poor dear, I think she has missed you."

And as I go in, Sylvia's eyes, fixed with a strained anxiety on the opening door, look first at me, and then beyond me.

"Max?" she says, in an eager, quivering whisper.

"Yes, dear, it is Max," I answer, struggling hard to speak steadily. "Will you try to be quiet if he comes to see you?"

And then she begins to tremble so violently that I know it is best to call him at once.

He stumbles as he enters, like one who walks in the

dark; and then he goes and kneels by her side, and with an unutterable tenderness lays his lips on her wasted hand, hiding his face from her.

"You have come," she says, looking at him with so bright a light in her large eyes, that for a moment she looks almost like herself. "Oh, Max! thank God, you have come!"

He lifts his haggard face, full of a great woe, a greater love, and looks at her.

"Yes, my darling, I have come," he says, in a shaking voice; "never to leave you any more."

For answer, her white and wasted hand seeks his and lies in it, and he, with the other, gently and reverently smooths the tangled golden hair upon her forehead.

And I, creeping away to the outer room, leave them alone. God help them! they have not long to be together.

* * * * * *

That night Max and Mr. Jeffries take my place for an hour or two; while I lie down in the dressing-room, ready to start up at a moment's notice.

It seems to me when I, too weak to resist, let them force me to consent, that it is utterly impossible that I, who know how short a time there is left to me of my darling's life, should *sleep*. Will there not be enough

long, useless, miserable days and months and years in which to sleep when she shall be gone, that I should waste even one of the precious minutes left to me when she is at least *alive*—when I can at least see her, touch her, be near her?

And yet, nature is stronger than I, and I, who have so long fought and struggled with sleep, am, almost the moment my head touches the pillow, conquered by it.

. . . . I wake with a start, with a confused and awful sense of dread. The morning light streams full into the room, and Max and Mr. Jeffries are standing over me, and looking at me.

I stagger to my feet. I totter forwards with a terrible cry, wrung from my awful fear.

"She is not—oh, she is not *dead?*"

There is a moment's pause, and then Mr. Jeffries lays his hand kindly on me.

"Try to be calm," he answers, with a little tremor in his voice. "She is not dead. She has had a better night than she has had yet. She is sleeping and breathing most quietly. I hardly like to tell you—I do not know how you will bear it—but I think I may almost dare to say there is a little hope."

Hope! I have borne despair quite bravely and quietly. When they told me she would die I only felt as if they had given me a heavy blow that stunned me

and made my very heart seem numb. But hope!—hope! that is more than I can bear.

With a great cry—a cry of such exceeding gladness that it seems to snap some cord that pain and grief have strung tight round my heart and brain, I throw up my arms in the air, and fall senseless at their feet.

CHAPTER XIII.

AND with slow and tottering steps, often pausing, often stumbling by the way, so that our hearts grow sick again with fear, our darling comes back to us from the very gates of death.

And it comes to pass that on the last day of September she and I are together in the little room where you, my reader, have seen us before, and, if you have followed us patiently thus far, see us now for the last time.

It is evening; but, though the lamps are lit the blinds are drawn up, and Sylvia's couch is placed in front of one of the windows, that she may feast her eyes on the beautiful world to which she has come back almost as one risen from the dead.

For, though it is night, it is not dark. High up in the sky, "riding near her highest noon," the pale-faced

moon is staring straight down at us, bathing trees and grass and flowers in her cold white sheen; and

> "Heaven's ebon vault,
> Studded with stars unutterably bright,
> Through which the moon's unclouded grandeur rolls,
> Seems like a canopy which love has spread
> To curtain her sleeping world."

Her pale light falls too on Sylvia, on her white gown with the dainty laces and knots of ribbon put on for Max's benefit, on her upturned face, to which her recent illness has given a more etherealized beauty. Her eyes, always large, look unnaturally large and dark now in her thin cheeks, and her hair, cut short, is simply pushed back in wavy masses that frame her small face like an aureole.

We are very silent. We have hardly spoken since Max left us. Sylvia is lying with hands clasped loosely in front of her, staring straight up at the moon—who does not forbid us to look in her face, as the sun does—with an infinite content on her tender mouth and in her lovely thoughtful eyes; and I—am] simply looking at Sylvia. It has seemed to me, since she was given back to me, that I should be content to sit so *always*. Only to rest my eyes upon her, only to feel that she is *there*, is not that enough? Do not they to whom God has been less merciful than He has been to me feel that to

have their dear ones within sight of their longing, hungering eyes, within touch of their empty hands, would be such unutterable unrealizable bliss that they could scarce bear it and live?

After a while, I am conscious that she has left off looking at the moon—and is looking at me.

"Esther," she says presently, "do you know that your hair is turning grey?"

"Perhaps it is only the effect of the moonlight," I say lightly, shifting my head; "it always makes everything look white."

"It is *not* the moonlight," she says, earnestly; "there are a number of white hairs just at the side. Oh, Esther, Esther!" (stretching out her arms to me) "*I* have put them there."

"Not you, my dear," I say, quietly; "but the horrid fever."

"It is *you* who have suffered most," she says, stroking my hand, and looking lovingly and regretfully at me. "I do not think I have seen before how white and worn and thin you look. But all the same do not call it a horrid fever; to me" (with a slow smile) "it was a *blessed* fever. It gave me Max."

"Do you not give it too much credit?" I say, smiling too, and quite willing to turn her thoughts away from myself. "Max must have come home *some* day, and when he had come to find you free as well

as himself, would it not have been sure to be all right?"

"I do not know," she answers, gravely. "Sometimes I think it was only my great danger that knocked down all barriers between us, and made him forget everything but me. Sometimes, I think but for that his pride would have stood between us, separating us even to the end. Even now" (with a little laugh) "there can be no doubt that he would like me a good deal better if I had no money."

"I do not think that he could like you a good deal better," I answer; "and it seems to me a poor sort of pride that cannot let him take a gift from one he loves, —a sort that he will be well rid of. No doubt" (I add, drily) "he will learn in time to accommodate himself to circumstances. They are not such as most men would quarrel with."

"And if *I* have a drawback," she says, half in jest half in earnest, and with a touch of her old spirit, "he has one too. It is impossible to deny that, however little he may have cared for her, he was once engaged to Lucy Bowden."

(Even now the name comes slowly over her lips, as if she had a great distaste for it.)

"And on the other hand, *you* were engaged to Gerald Carrington," I say, sharply, ready to defend Max. "So there you are quits."

She laughs a little, then draws a long breath of utter content.

"If he has a drawback," she says, looking up with eyes shining with a great happiness, "I like him better with it than I should like any other man without it. I know" (very wistfully) "that it is a world in which there is a great deal more sadness than happiness; and yet I think if God gives us happiness He means us to make the most of it while we have it, so that even if sorrow comes we may look back and say, 'For a little while I was *happy*.' It is not given to everyone to be completely happy, even for a little while; but, oh, Esther! Esther! I do not think there is anywhere—anywhere in all the world—a happier woman than I am to-night."

Then with the tears in my eyes—happy tears of tenderness and great gladness—with broken, faltering voice, I, knowing the time has come, which, such a little while ago, I with despairing faithless heart thought would never come, give to my darling the message that I have carried in my heart through all these years from her dying mother; and when I have done, Sylvia raises herself from her couch.

"Tell it to me again, Esther; tell me in her own words," she cries, with the tears streaming down her cheeks.

And so with faltering voice I repeat the last words.

"Tell my darling, from me, that it was her mother's

dearest wish, and that she is sure, quite sure, that wherever she may be God will let her know of her child's happiness—and she will be happier for it."

"Does she know? Can she see—can she see me *now*, at this moment?" cries Sylvia, throwing herself on her knees in the moonlight, stretching out her arms, and lifting her lovely wet eyes to the quiet stars. "Oh, mother, mother, look down! look down! and see your happy child."

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